









ROBERTA COWELL'S  
STORY



*An Autobiography*



# ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

*by*

*Herself*

WITH A PREFACE BY CANON MILLBOURN



---

WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD  
MELBOURNE :: LONDON :: TORONTO

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS  
KINGSWOOD, SURREY**

To my parents, my doctors and nurses, Lisa, Douglas, Charles and the Canon, this book is humbly and gratefully dedicated.

“So God created man in his own image . . . male and female created he them.”

Genesis i. 27.



## ILLUSTRATIONS

Roberta Cowell, 1954

*Frontispiece*

*The following illustrations will be found between  
pages 12 and 13*

The Cowell family in the early 1920s

Seaside holiday

Christmas party

Robert with his brother

Riding with his brother

Robert's first flight

Whitgift. House Rugger XV

"I usually played tennis right-handed . . ."

Aged sixteen

Robert Cowell was commissioned in the R.A.F. in 1936

Robert Cowell at the wheel of the car in which he won the  
premier award, London-Land's End Trial, 1936

Aged eighteen, home workshop at Croydon

Brooklands, 1939

Captain Robert Cowell, R.A.S.C., February, 1941

Military Identity Card

*The following illustrations will be found between  
pages 60 and 61*

Cranwell, June 26th, 1942

Robert Cowell with his squadron, 1942

## ILLUSTRATIONS

### **In France, 1944**

Major-General Cowell, Roberta's father, receiving the order of Commander, Legion of Merit, from General Eisenhower.

### **P.O.W. Identity Card**

### **P.O.W. Lecture Course Certificate**

### **Brighton Speed Trials, 1946**

### **“Don’t drop it!”—Dover, 1947**

### **Racing at Berne, 1948**

### **Robert Cowell, 1947**

### **Part of the programme for the Jersey International Road Race, 1948**

*The following illustrations will be found between  
pages 124 and 125*

Robert Cowell driving in a speed trial at Gosport, 1951

Robert Cowell's Birth Certificate

Detail of marginal note on Birth Certificate

Robert Cowell's decree absolute

Roberta with her father and mother

Crossing Piccadilly Circus

“It was necessary to establish a new personality”

With Canon Millbourn of Bristol Cathedral

In France

In Paris

In the Louvre

*facing page* 132

Back at the wheel again

133

“Cooking was unexpectedly exciting”

133

## PREFACE

*by*

CANON MILLBOURN

Two or three years ago a writer in a medical journal, dealing with the subject of sex-reversal, began by remarking that “the history of sex-reversal, founded on speculative thought, may be judged best by the human passions it has provoked”. I realised plainly when the present book was first projected, and feel even more clearly on reading it now, that to arouse passions of any sort was about the last idea in the mind of the writer. Whatever purpose she had in mind from the first, and followed consistently, it was not that, as indeed her readers will perceive for themselves.

That there is a history of the subject at all is significant, though even today the fact is very imperfectly understood. It begins a very long way back, and my own first dim awareness of its existence goes back to the construe of a Latin poet in my distant school days. It is also one which demands careful disentanglement from masses of superstition and mythological accretions. That is a work which lies altogether outside the scope of this book: but the indication remains that it is not the problem that can be called new, but our attitude of mind to it, and the scientific knowledge and the surgical skill coming increasingly to our help in finding the answer to it. Our concern is with a new answer to an old problem; and it is quite essential that the new answer should have the broadest possible basis of solid fact. That is to say, evidence is needed, and

## PREFACE

evidence is what Miss Cowell has supplied, or at the least clearly indicated. That degree of qualification is perhaps necessary since part of what she has to say points the way into provinces of highly specialised research, where the surgeon and the endocrinologist alone can assess its value. Part again yields information, the full significance of which, as psychological data, can be appreciated solely by the trained observer in that field. Yet the general reader can hardly fail to be impressed by the dispassionate way in which the writer records her own observations of herself, and the courage with which she has faced the business of presenting them. Neither task can have been easy; but I fancy she would ask no better reward than the consciousness of having done something to furnish material for the medical psychologist and the geneticist, and to help toward a fuller knowledge of the psyche with its mysterious workings and of the biological foundations of intersexuality.

The matter does not end with that. There are very extensive moral and theological implications which I am deeply conscious I must try to think out. This is not the place for their discussion, and in any case there are many others far better qualified for that than I: but it is only fair for me to say that I owe a very real debt to the writer for the confidence and friendship she has given me since we first met some time ago. If her book brings me into touch with others who have had comparable experiences, the obligation will be greater still. There must be many such; and if nothing else had been gained, the openness of such a story as is told in these pages could be of immense help to them in their own struggle, which in the nature of things is likely to be a single-handed one. Reticence is a very desirable thing, but secretiveness can sometimes be a very dangerous one.

“The past is forgotten, the future doesn’t matter.” In one sense Roberta Cowell and I will differ amicably about that. In that sense the past is generously recorded and the future will show those people who will owe happier and more balanced

## PREFACE

days to one whom a correspondent of mine recently described as "this gallant lady". And perhaps she herself comes very near the heart of the thing when she writes, "Instead of bawling . . . I spoke quietly." She speaks quietly in this book—and calls for sober reading and sympathetic understanding.

A. R. MILLBOURN.

THE CATHEDRAL,  
BRISTOL.



## CHAPTER ONE

IT IS A STRANGE STORY THAT I HAVE TO TELL; too fantastic to be fiction. I have experienced the unprecedented and incredible thing, first to have lived and felt as a man, and then to live and feel as a woman.

I was not an effeminate male. I knew that my body had certain feminine characteristics, but no one ever suspected this because I compensated for it by endeavouring to be as aggressively masculine as possible. It was only after the war, when a violent emotional shock upset my glandular system and my feminine characteristics became more marked, that I realised the extent of my physical abnormalities. I ceased to fight against my femininity and accepted it. I became a feminised male, then a boyish woman, and finally a feminine woman. The change has been so great that it is extremely difficult for me to realise that I was once a Spitfire pilot with a liking for pretty girls, that I once hated children, that I violently shunned anything which could possibly be classified as 'sissy'.

It is comparatively easy to accept the fact that my body is so completely changed that I feel as though my mind has been transplanted into another person, but my mind has changed too, and I am quite different temperamentally, in my general outlook, and also in my interests. This has been more difficult to accept, but now after three years as a woman the adjustment has been achieved.

I was very fortunate in having wonderful parents. My father was a surgeon and a colonel in the Territorial Army. He was

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

also an artist, sculptor, writer, lecturer, naturalist, and a good violinist. Mother was very interested in social work, and was a fine pianist and singer.

There were three children, two boys and a girl. We were of widely different temperament. Father allotted us little plots of garden in which we could each do exactly as we liked. My sister grew flowers, my brother grew vegetables, and I commenced furious digging in an attempt—unsuccessful—to reach the centre of the Earth.. There was a nurse who brought us up, with the assistance of my mother and father. I conceived a passionate loathing for the nurse which I am sure was mutual. She was about fifteen feet high and seemed to have come straight out of the Book of Revelation. I was told that when I grew up I should feel only love and gratitude towards Nanny for looking after me so well. When I met her a few years ago I was gratified to observe no noticeable diminution of my hatred towards her!

I had a strict religious and moral upbringing, and this resulted in my being rather anti-religious for many years.

Sunday was hell on earth, it dragged by interminably, shrouded in gloom. Many and ingenious were the methods I employed to avoid going to church, but they availed me little. My nurse was the daughter of a missionary, and on Sunday morning her eye would gleam with a fanatical zeal. I had to go to morning service, and then to the children's service in the afternoon. The very moment I was old enough I was taken to evening service as well; off I went, in a tumbrel disguised as a motor-bus.

Finally came the great day when I was considered old enough to go to the early morning service in addition to all the others; my nurse's cup of joy was running over, but I felt as though I were having to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Church services were the epitome of boredom to me. I knew most of the services by heart, but only dimly comprehended the meaning of the words. What little I did

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

understand often seemed unreasonable. Why was I a miserable sinner, asking for mercy? Why did I need to be delivered from evil? Was I really born in sin?

The only time I really enjoyed the service was when we were visited by an elderly Bishop, who gabbled the prayers at an enormous rate, and there was always the chance that he might make a mistake or even, if we were exceptionally lucky, make a spoonerism.

There was also a preacher who had a loose tooth which caused him to whistle in the most fascinating way, and once we were visited by a gentleman who played the trombone in the pulpit.

Occasionally we had a special evangelical service on a Sunday evening, at which the congregation was worked up with the aid of lantern slides and theatrical lighting effects into a state of mass hysteria. This sort of thing seemed to me to be definitely wrong in some way, but at least it relieved the boredom.

I was apparently expected to believe the Bible quite literally word for word, from the Creation and Adam and Eve up to the rider on the White Horse, with the sharp sword going out of his mouth.

When you died there seemed to be two grim alternatives: either you went to Heaven, and spent eternity wearing long white robes and playing a harp, which was your reward for leading a good life; or you were damned to everlasting Hell Fire, which was very unpleasant indeed.

In order to avoid going to Hell you had to have faith, and 'believe'. I completely failed to see how I could have faith in something that I just did not believe in, and I did not see how I could possibly make myself believe in something which seemed to me to be unreasonable.

I was considered a soul damned to everlasting torment. Everyone assured me, however, that I need not worry, because, even if everything else failed, the day I faced eternity I should

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

repent. Later I shall describe how this prophecy turned out when I was at the point of what was apparently certain death.

I could not understand why we should be conceived and born in sin. It just did not ring true, even though I did not know, nor could I find out, what the word 'conceive' meant.

Later it was made clear that although, most unfortunately, there seemed to be no way of procreating other than the conventional one, the operative word was procreation and most certainly not recreation.

When still quite small I was given a scooter. I took this straight to the top of a fairly steep hill, and launched off down the incline, making suitable noises which were intended to resemble the engine of a motor-cycle. On reaching the first bend my attempts to emulate the speedway riders' technique were unsuccessful. My unconscious body was picked up by a livid Nanny, and thrust into a push-chair, and propelled homewards. *En route* we met an old lady, a friend of the family. By this time I had regained consciousness and I can still remember vividly how upset I was when she made some pithy comments about little boys who at the ripe old age of five still had to be pushed about in wheel-chairs like little girls.

At kindergarten I jibbed at such unmanly occupations as needlework and pressing flowers.

The preparatory school was for boys only. My only distinction here was to win a medal at a boxing tournament. I won on points by crying slightly less than my opponent. It was extremely embarrassing to discover that I had an aptitude for mathematics, but fortunately for me the other boys soon realised that it was very far from being attributable to swotting. It was simply that by some occult means I managed to get the right answers, though often I could not write down the working. They were decent enough to forgive me for this, and I made up for it by being bottom of the form in most other subjects.

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

The next rung of the educational ladder was the public school.

Being rather fat, and extremely sensitive about it, I was naturally teased unmercifully. My first nickname was 'Circumference', but by the time I had reached the age of fifteen and had slimmed down a little, my large pelvis and feminoidal fat distribution earned me the distinction of being named after a character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The character whose name I was given was Bottom. . . .

A large number of rude words were added to my vocabulary, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that I managed to refrain from using them at home. I initiated my small brother, still at prep school, into their use, and he distinguished himself at a croquet party by missing the ball and letting forth a round oath. I thought it most unfair that I was the one to receive the blame for this regrettably stupid lapse on his part.

My sexual education was furthered by a school friend who was a clergyman's son, and a veritable mine of misinformation. Some books on the subject were purchased, not without a good deal of difficulty, and surreptitiously perused by an anxious little group in an otherwise empty form room, with someone keeping 'cave' outside.

When I was about thirteen years old I had just finished my enormous breakfast—lunch money was being saved as usual—when I felt an agonising pain in the tummy. It was diagnosed as acute appendicitis and I was rushed off to a nursing home.

The best available surgeon was my father. He was naturally most unwilling to operate on his own child, but my mother insisted that he should. Within an hour from the first onset of the pain I was whirling away down into a vortex of anaesthesia. Another surgeon stood by, and when it was discovered that the appendix had ruptured it was thought for a moment that he would have to take over. With a superhuman effort my father pulled himself together and completed the operation, which was most successful. I was told afterwards that I had nearly

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

died, and that I owed my life entirely to his skill and courage.

From a very early age I had shown an aptitude for mechanical things. Between the ages of twelve and sixteen I spent most of my spare time, including a great deal of the school holidays, in engineering workshops, particularly the machine shops of Trojan Limited, of Croydon.

My ambition was to become a racing motorist, but I also wanted to design my own cars. I had immense enthusiasm and never doubted for one moment that I should ultimately achieve that which I so ardently desired. We had a Motor Club at school, one member of which was John Cunningham, later to become a famous test pilot. We would drive round the grounds of the school on a variety of decrepit motor-cycles and cars. We were, of course, far too young to hold driving licences.

My inclinations, as they developed, were entirely heterosexual. I hated and loathed any boy who showed the slightest sign of being a 'sissy'. I treated any homosexual overtures made to me with complete horror and dislike. Although I made friends with other boys, I could not bear any form of physical contact with a male. Even shaking hands was unpleasant, and it was quite impossible for me to stand having someone link his arm in mine.

It never occurred to me to wonder why this should be. I just regarded males as horrible things!

I wanted to fly fighter aircraft, drive fast cars, and perform other feats. In my day-dreams I would be the schoolboy's idol; heroically doing fantastically courageous things, then nonchalantly signing autographs.

Oddly enough, I never wanted to be an engine driver. Perhaps I disliked the thought of having to proceed along ready laid lines, without any choice as to direction and destination.

I had many girl friends, and found them far easier to understand and get on with than boys, and I preferred their company.

I joined the Officers' Training Corps, and eventually became a N.C.O. We had field days and the annual camp was at

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Aldershot or Salisbury Plain. It seemed to me that the male animal became even more male and a lot more animal when away from home, and I did not enjoy these affairs very much. Most unfortunately I never managed to learn to smoke, but with practice I could drink beer without actually making a face, though it was always difficult to hide the shudder which invariably shook my small frame after a draught of the nauseating stuff. In order to compensate for this distressing lack of manliness I managed to acquire an enormous repertoire of extremely doubtful jokes, with the courteous assistance of the Regular Army, and thus was accepted by the *cognoscenti*.

My favourite sports were tennis and fencing, but I scraped into the school Rugger XV, as a wing three-quarter. The communal baths after games and turn-outs were a source of acute embarrassment. I was still not used to the male body and did my best to use the big bath when it was unoccupied.

One morning, during the Latin class, a day boy suddenly gave a sharp cry and sped from the room, without even observing the formality of requesting permission of the master to leave the room. Through the window we could see him dash to the bicycle shed, then pedal madly down the drive.

We were all most curious to know the reason for this odd behaviour, and many and varied were the theories put forward. It transpired later that the poor fellow had been reading in bed an epic poem on the subject of one 'Eskimo Nell', and had completely forgotten that he had left it under his pillow until the Latin class. His frantic dash home was all to no purpose, though. His mother had found it.

Towards the end of my schooldays, a school friend and I visited Belgium, Germany, and Austria during the summer holidays. My friend insisted in puffing away at a small but revolting-looking cheroot. I was unable to think up a good reason why I should not indulge in this manly occupation, so I lighted one, and puffed away with a marked absence of relish. A short while later I had my first view of the romantic Danube,

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

but was too occupied in being sick into it to notice whether it was beautiful or blue.

We spent a few days in a little village on the Rhine. Nearby towered a forbidding-looking mass of rock. It was a direct challenge to our adventurous souls, and we decided that the very next day we would climb to the summit or perish in the attempt. No doubt the Germans would be amazed to discover that the two intrepid English boys had scaled the heights; it was quite obviously extremely unlikely that any mere German had ever managed to get more than half-way up.

We left at dawn, and after a hazardous and arduous climb, involving the use of a great deal of climbing equipment, we reached the summit about mid-afternoon. As we laboriously but triumphantly drew ourselves over the ledge on to the top, dead tired and aching in every limb, we were most annoyed to find what was apparently a Teutonic Sunday school treat in full swing. Small children were everywhere. To add insult to injury, not only was there a comfortable tea-house, but there was also a small mountain railway which ran merrily up and down the far side of the heights.

In Frankfurt I managed to get myself arrested for taking cine-camera films of Nazis drilling. I was put into a cell in the local police station, and was released a few hours later when I had ostentatiously destroyed some unused film stock. The films of the Nazis drilling came out quite well. At this time my knowledge of the German language consisted of the very useful words '*Ein Eis, bitte*' (one ice-cream, please).

Fortunately for me, my arrest encouraged me to learn German. The next time I was in Frankfurt my knowledge of the language undoubtedly saved my life.

I had a phlegmatic nature, never lost my temper, and, unlike the others, never fell in love. The only thing that could really move me was good music, so I was careful not to listen to any.

A school friend disliked music heartily, and surprised me by saying that he was off to a Promenade Concert. "I always

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

thought you didn't like music," I said. "I don't," he replied, "but my parents insist on my going, so I am taking with me a good book and a pair of ear-plugs."

One thing I never could understand about schoolboys was their universal enthusiasm for stamp collecting. It always struck me as a complete waste of time, and seemed a remarkably stupid hobby. Personally, I sedulously collected match-box tops. . . .

As I grew older nature took away some of my rotundity, giving me in exchange a crop of pimples. My eyelashes grew longer and longer until I had to cut them to avoid comment. They were so long that they used to touch the glasses which I had to wear. I hated these glasses, which were supposed to correct my long sight. Someone told me about the Bates system, so I threw my glasses away and started eye exercises. There was a marked improvement in my eyesight, which became exceptionally good, and I have never worn glasses since.

I am naturally left-handed, but was forced to use my right. The result was I became ambidexterous and unable to write well with either hand. I usually played tennis right-handed, but could drive forehand on either wing.

I had several hobbies, amongst them photography. I was interested in film-making and formed a film club at school. We made several short films on 9.5 mm film, then decided to attempt a two-reel epic. The story was about gangsters and involved much brandishing of firearms. One of the boys had borrowed a revolver from his father—a most realistic-looking weapon. The thought that it might be loaded never seemed to occur to anyone. Whilst the others were firing off blank cartridges at each other he clicked the trigger and was rewarded by a most impressive report, and the revolver almost jumped out of his hand with the recoil. At the same moment the soft felt hat of the boy whom he had aimed at fell to the ground. As it turned out, we were lucky that it was not the boy who fell

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

to the ground, because his hat had been drilled clean through by a live bullet! It had passed about an inch above the crown of his head.

I was extremely annoyed because, as it was only a rehearsal, I had not got a film of the hat being shot off.

The boy whose borrowed hat was perforated was very angry indeed because he did not know what his father was going to say when he found the holes in his hat!

At sixteen I left school and entered for a series of tennis tournaments. In the first of these I came up against a well-known player in the second round of the Open. He beat me, but let me take a set off him. He suggested that we team up to play together in the doubles in some of the future events, and offered to give me advice and practice. Naturally I was pleased and flattered at his interest in my game, and it was arranged that we should meet for tea in a London hotel on the next Sunday to discuss arrangements.

He was staying in the hotel, and the tea was served in his room. To my complete horror it was soon apparent that the interest was not so much in my game as in me. I shot out of the room, sped downstairs, and never spoke to him again.

Looking back at the episode now I can remember that he was quite young and attractive. However, rather than have him or any other male lay a finger on me I would have died of shame and revulsion.

From a very early age I had had a deep-rooted fear and hatred of monstrosities in any shape or form. This dated back to a visit to a little museum down in Sussex, when I was a very small child. There were some horrible things in glass bottles and show-cases and these affected me strongly. If I ever came across a book with an illustration of one of these things, such as a two-headed cat, I would fling it away from me, and feel violently ill. I made a tremendous effort to get accustomed to such things, but the phobia still remained, as strong as ever. Because of this I had to give up thoughts of becoming a doctor,

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

which had always been an ambition of mine. I was also very squeamish about dissection.

The fear must have been due to an instinctive knowledge of my own body, because when at last my dual sexuality was resolved into one, the fear and loathing of these things vanished, leaving no trace.

In order to appear as virile and masculine as possible, I bought myself a pipe, together with a box of matches and a packet of 'pipe refills'. My first essay in the art of pipe smoking was, very misguidedly, in a railway carriage. Inserting a refill into the bowl of the pipe I put a light to it, and was rewarded with a nauseating whiff of smoke. After a few tentative sucks at the thing I lost my head and blew into it. The plug of burning tobacco shot into the air, creating alarm and despondency amongst the other occupants of the carriage, which appeared to be filled with experienced pipe smokers who seemed to resent the intrusion of a newcomer into their ranks.

The man next to me, however, proffered a few kindly words of advice. He suggested that the tobacco be tamped into the bowl of the pipe, and if I *must* use a 'refill' it was usually better to remove the paper from it first. He was then kind enough to offer me a cigarette. I felt that in the circumstances I could hardly confess that I did not smoke, so I took one, inhaled vigorously, and a few moments later was distributing my breakfast all over the outside of the carriage. I got out at the next stop.

Just as some men are always extremely elegantly dressed, so I was invariably revoltingly scruffy. I had a genuine dislike, bordering on hatred, of new clothes. I usually wore an old sports coat, spotted with gravy, chemicals, oil, and paint. My trousers had a series of horizontal accordion pleats, my shoes were badly trodden over, my socks flapped round my ankles, and my shirts were usually of a broad checked pattern, chosen to clash as far as possible with the rest of the ensemble. I never wore a hat, and when I wore a raincoat it looked as

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

though it had been used as an overall on some particularly dirty work, as it often had.

Even amongst college students, not renowned for sartorial elegance, I was considered rather ill dressed.

Although it was my intention to be an automobile engineer, a knowledge of aircraft constructional principles and methods would be essential, so I arranged to work through the shops of General Aircraft Ltd., of Hanworth. Starting in the detail department, I worked through to the service shop.

Practical experience of working as a mechanic on racing cars was essential but hard to come by. The problem was solved by turning up at Brooklands with a bucket and a pair of overalls. I donned my overalls, filled the bucket to the brim with water, then carefully carried it into the paddock, past a gatekeeper who prided himself on never letting anyone in without a pass. Once inside it was easy to find someone who needed assistance, and I would often happily work throughout the night when a car was urgently needed for practice or a race.

Competition work was started the moment I was legally old enough to drive on the road. After my seventeenth birthday I drove as much as I possibly could. I entered for the London-Land's End trial and other similar events followed. This was all excellent practice in driving in front of a crowd, and great fun, but it was only the first rung of the ladder. I decided to enter the R.A.F. on a short service commission. I should learn to fly, be well paid, and could start motor-racing during my two months' leave.

I was seventeen when I joined the R.A.F. as a pupil pilot. My initial training was at Desford, near Leicester, and I was very proud when I got my commission; the youngest officer in the Service at the time. There was, however, one drawback: flying made me feel extremely ill. When I left Tiger Moths and went on to service aircraft I felt even more ill and was stupid enough to mention it. The result was that I had a medical board and was promptly invalidated out, with a log-book

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

endorsement saying I was permanently unfit for further flying duties with the R.A.F. I was not very upset about this, as compared with motor-racing, flying was boring.

The day the final verdict came through from the Air Ministry I left Grantham. I put on my civilian clothes, climbed into my sports car, and started for London. Half-way home the oil-pressure began to fail, and an ominous clatter from the engine told that a big-end was disintegrating. There was a garage in the vicinity, but the proprietor refused to let me borrow his facilities and repair the car myself, even when I offered to pay the full charge he would have made to do the job himself. In those days I would never allow a garage to touch my cherished engine, so the car was left there and a lift was thumbed to London.

It was a Bedford driver who very kindly took me into the metropolis. I was just about to get out of the lorry, and was wondering whether to offer him five shillings or ten, when he gave me a two-shilling piece! This may give some slight idea of the nattiness of my personal appearance.

I had given up playing tennis, as it occupied too much time. To keep fit I used to skate at Purley ice-rink. My instructress was very keen on flying, so one day I took her up in an open two-seater. She clutched both sides of the cockpit and screamed loudly over the inter-com whenever I banked slightly. "Take me down, take me down," she screamed, "I know I'm going to tip out." After a few minutes of this I turned the plane on to its back, and we hung by our straps. Hers were a bit loose, but she stayed in, and from that moment onwards enjoyed every moment of it thoroughly. I did all kinds of aerobatics, and only stopped when I felt too ill to continue.

The period from the end of 1936 until the outbreak of war was mainly occupied by engineering and motor-racing. I studied engineering at University College, London, and drove racing cars in races and speed trials. Motor-racing proved to be all I had expected and more.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

It was delightful to find that most of the drivers, irrespective of age and fame, seemed to be capable of behaving like overgrown schoolboys. I never actually found any of them using stink bombs, but few could have been trusted with a bag of itching powder or a couple of Chinese crackers.

Charles, a very well-known and successful driver, once turned up in the club-house at Brooklands with a dangerous-looking pistol. With a cry of "Hands up," he pointed it at a group of members, pulled the trigger, and, in perfect silence, a small pennant unfurled itself from the barrel of the weapon, bearing in large letters the word 'BANG'. This went down rather well, and later in the evening he was called upon to repeat the performance. He pointed his fearsome-looking weapon at the group, now augmented by friends, who had all been told that something amusing was going to happen. This time when he pulled the trigger there was a deafening explosion and a cloud of smoke. Never have so many people jumped so high.

Perhaps Charles's finest effort was at Donington, on the occasion of the visit of the German Grand Prix teams. Before the race the cars were drawn up on the starting grid. Massed bands were playing, flags fluttered, the sun shone, and the vast stands at the start were packed with thousands of people, eager to see the great spectacle. The drivers were lined up and introduced to the Duke of Kent and Herr Huhnlein, the German Sportsfuehrer. The Duke got into a beautiful new twelve-cylinder Lagonda, with Dick Seaman as driver, and the car glided away to do a lap of the circuit. Herr Huhnlein stepped into a magnificent Mercedes-Benz, to be driven round the course by Carracciola, the German champion. As the starter button was pressed there was a violent explosion and a cloud of black smoke from under the bonnet. Charles had put squibs on the plug leads.

He was never known to have the slightest respect for personages. One slightly coloured gentleman of very high rank

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

insisted on standing on the roof of Charles's pit. He received a vigorous squirt from a fire extinguisher, with the words, "Back to the jungle, you coffee-coloured imp."

It was during the practice period for the Donington Grand Prix, in which I was acting as a mechanic, that I had my first really narrow escape. I had been testing a Maserati, and had been driving it at maximum speed, about 140 m.p.h., down the long straight. It was all I could do to hold the car at all, which made it all the more unnerving when I was passed on both sides at once by a couple of Mercedes, which shot by, doing at least thirty m.p.h. more than I was!

As I pulled into the pits, I slowed down to a walking pace, using the full power of the brakes. One front wheel slewed inwards and the car stopped dead with a jolt. One of the two independent steering boxes had sheared a key, leaving one front wheel flapping loose. Had this happened a few moments before I could hardly have survived.

Nineteen-thirty-nine was my third season of racing. I was just twenty years old, and from March until August took part in at least one event every week-end. May was an especially busy month. One Saturday I was at Brooklands; the following day at Wetherby, near Leeds; two days later I was in Antwerp, practising for the Grand Prix the following Sunday, after which I returned to Brooklands for another race the same week.

As I maintained my three cars myself, with little outside assistance, I would often get very tired. After a meeting at Shelsley Walsh I arrived home at Croydon at five p.m. and went upstairs to change. A wave of tiredness swept over me and I lay for a few moments face downwards across the bed, still fully dressed, with my feet on the floor. It seemed only a few moments later when I discovered that I had dozed off. My watch told me it was seven o'clock, but somehow something seemed strange. I soon discovered what it was—it was seven a.m. *next morning* and I had slept for fourteen hours!

It was about this time that I acquired a new and very

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

beautiful girl-friend. Naturally I took her down to Brooklands to show her off, and she was a sensation. During a saunter round the paddock we stood behind the exhaust of a car which was warming up its engine, emitting the most delightful crackle and a wonderful aroma of burning castor oil and nitro-benzene. I stood there, inhaling deeply with an "Ah, Bisto!" expression, when she said, rather irritably, "Do let's move on, and get away from this horrible smell."

In a moment my feelings for her changed entirely. Had she suddenly grown another head I could not have regarded her with more horror and dislike. I left her absolutely flat, then and there, and never saw her again. I have no idea how she got home, though I can hardly imagine her having much difficulty.

Throughout the war I carried with me, amongst my personal effects, a tiny bottle filled with racing fuel and oil. I would often sniff it, and would be wafted in my imagination straight back to the race-track.

It is very hard now to realise the intensity of the passionate enthusiasm which motor-cars and motor-racing aroused. It was the be-all, and sometimes nearly the end-all, of my existence. It was not until 1948, when I was psycho-analysed, that I was brought to realise that to me racing was a symbol of courage, power, and virility. I was trying desperately to compensate for my own unconscious knowledge of my lack of manhood. When I finally knew the full truth about myself, both mental and physical, the tremendous and all-pervading enthusiasm for motor-racing vanished completely.

## CHAPTER TWO

AT THE AGE OF TWENTY the nearest I had got to making history was when I almost ran over Mr. Neville Chamberlain two years previously on a Belisha crossing in Parliament Square. The old boy was remarkably spry and leapt to safety. I ignored the advice of the other occupants of the car who suggested that I went round again and had another go. Perhaps it might have been better if I had. . . .

Now, however, in September 1939 I felt that I would have an opportunity to take part in the forthcoming struggle. It seemed obvious that the best and most responsible job to have was that of a fighter pilot, so I bombarded the Air Ministry with applications, requests for interview, and telephone calls. After trying hard for three months I was convinced that with a medical history like mine it just could not be done, not at the moment, anyway.

The War Office was then approached. They gave me the option of an immediate commission in the Ordnance as a mechanical engineer, or I could join the R.A.S.C. and get commissioned through the ranks. I chose the latter as it seemed to have more opportunities for advancement. I enlisted in January 1940 and was sent to Aldershot.

When we arrived we were sent to the stores to draw our kit, and there the proceedings started on a slightly morbid note. We were each issued with a pair of identity tags. Someone asked the warrant officer why there were two. He was told, "Tie one round yer neck and the other round yer body, then when yer bloody 'ead gets knocked orf we'll know 'oo it belongs to."

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

It was this same warrant officer who was in charge of our first church parade. Each man removed his hat as he entered the church, all except one, who forgot. He ambled down the centre aisle, looking extremely foolish in his new forage cap, which was slightly too big for him and was dead straight on his head. A stentorian whisper from the warrant officer reverberated round the church, "Take yer 'at orf in the 'ouse of God . . . *runt.*"

Life in the barracks was very strange at first, and I never really got used to it. The complete lack of any sort of privacy was extremely unpleasant, and the sadly unimaginative bad language was monotonous. I was told by the more experienced that there were two golden rules to be adhered to, if I wanted my army life to go smoothly. One was: Never admit you can do anything. The other was: Always look busy, especially when you have nothing to do. At first these rules struck me as being singularly stupid and inept, but it was not long before I realised that there was quite a lot to be said for them.

On parade the sergeant called, "Anybody here drive a Rolls-Royce?" I opened my mouth, then remembered rule one and shut it again. An eager voice behind me said, "Yes, I can, sergeant." "Right," said the sergeant, "then you can double off and clean the latrines." On another occasion someone who admitted to being a professional xylophone player was given the job of mending a vast heap of duck-boards.

When the sergeant caught me wandering around the barracks with nothing to do I was given a few weeks of potato peeling, and after this I adopted the second of the golden rules, and went about with an armload of documents and an intent expression. After a week of this I managed to get attached to a nearby training school as a workshop instructor, and I received a local, acting, unpaid, but by no means unwanted, stripe.

One man received three days' compassionate leave as his house had been bombed, with his grandfather in it. On his

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

return we heard all about it. "You know," he said, "it was the most amazing thing: the old boy was buried underneath the débris for three whole days and nights, but when they dug him out there was not a mark on him, not one mark."

We all expressed surprise.

"Yes," he continued, "he was perfectly all right. Dead, of course."

A special parade was held, and we were surprised to observe that our commanding officer was accompanied by the lady in charge of the A.T.S., who were housed nearby. Two other A.T.S. officers were with her.

Slowly the little party walked up and down the lines of men, peering into each face. There were few who managed to avoid looking guilty. At long last all three identified a tall young soldier as being undoubtedly responsible for the dastardly crime, whatever it was. He was marched off and put on a '252'. He was confined to barracks under open arrest, but steadfastly refused to tell us what his 'crime' was.

Next morning he was up before the C.O. The charge was this: Section 40 of the Army Act; conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline, in that he did walk up and down outside the A.T.S. quarters after lights out, ringing a hand-bell and shouting the word 'Crumpet'.

In January 1941 my commission came through at last—it had taken twelve months instead of the fortnight which the War Office had assured me was the longest it could take! I was posted to a unit in Cambridgeshire with the rank of captain. I was in charge of mobile workshops.

In May 1941 I married a girl I had known for some years. There is little more to be said about this except that in many ways it was a typical war-time marriage, and not a very happy one. A few days after the ceremony I was posted to Iceland as Officer Commanding Heavy Repair Shops.

Soon after my arrival a vehicle caught fire whilst refuelling, and a large fire extinguisher, of the foam type, was brought into

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

action. We were both surprised and amused when the fire extinguisher suddenly burst into flames and began to burn like a flame thrower.

The explanation of this phenomenon was that some over-enterprising aircraft hand had filled the water compartment with an anti-freeze solution, consisting mainly of alcohol. This practice ceased forthwith!

Iceland was a strange place, full of fascinating surprises. I stayed at an army camp where every morning my batman would dip a bucket into a riverlet, and, lo and behold, it was immediately filled with boiling hot water, straight out of the ground.

I was taken out to see the geysers, and observed an earnest little group of senior army officers dismounting from their cars, followed by an orderly carrying a sack. The contents of the sack were dumped into the aperture of the largest geyser, and everyone retired to a safe distance. A minute or two later a jet of boiling water shot high into the air, and all were highly delighted. Apparently the sack contained soap, and was used to precipitate the eruption. They told me that yesterday's effort had been much more impressive, today they were trying a different sort of soap, tomorrow they would be using *soft* soap. . . .

On the way back I was shown a greenhouse, and was surprised to find bananas growing in it. The place was heated by a hot spring.

The island was a terribly bleak place, almost devoid of trees and with little vegetation, hence nearly every other shop seemed to be a chemist's. The Icelanders took so many pills that I was surprised they did not rattle when they walked. Even Reykjavik was rather less imposing than the cities with which the Americans were familiar. An American sergeant was overheard, whilst standing in one of the main streets of the capital of Iceland, to ask the way to the nearest town!

The docks were a fascinating spot. The place was a hive of

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

activity, and there was always something interesting going on. The dockers were remarkably adept at picking out crates which contained the more attractive type of cargo. A crane sling would be attached to a large, square wooden box, and the following instructions would be given to the crane driver, "Dahn a bit, dahn a bit. . . . Not too 'ard, not too 'ard." Then CRASH. The box would crash from a height of about six feet, amid cries of "Too 'ard". The wood splintered, the contents scattered.

A few minutes later everyone would be smoking a fat cigar.

I certainly did not envy the officer in charge of this job. He took it very seriously. A trailer was being carefully backed on to a small jetty by an R.A.S.C. driver, who obviously knew exactly what he was doing. "Left hand down," shouted the dock officer. The R.A.S.C. driver firmly put his right hand down even further and continued to back the trailer exactly down the centre of the jetty. "If you don't put your left hand down at once," shouted the officer, "I shall put you on a charge."

The driver obligingly put his left hand hard down, accelerated violently, and the trailer went clean over the edge into the water.

The officer apologised to the driver—he had not realised that when backing a two-wheel trailer it is necessary to turn the wheel in the opposite direction to normal. The trailer was hauled up, and the *status quo* generally restored.

A few minutes later along came another trailer, with another R.A.S.C. driver towing it. He too, began to back gently, and with the utmost precision aimed the trailer straight for the jetty. His judgment was superb. Most unfortunately the officer, who had now learned all about backing trailers in one easy lesson, noticed that the driver was on the wrong steering lock. "Right hand down," shrieked the dock officer. The driver took no notice. The officer thrust his head into the driver's cab. "Put that right hand down," he said. The driver

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

obliged, and gently backed the trailer into the water. It was a four-wheel trailer, and when backing you must steer these the same way, and not the opposite.

The Heavy Repair Shops had a vast amount of work to do, but my own work was almost entirely administrative, and I felt extremely frustrated. Instead of getting into the war I was further away from it than I would have been in England, and I was not even able to use my technical knowledge and experience to the full. With great difficulty I managed to get transferred to the R.A.F., and sailed for home. I was determined to become a fighter pilot.

First came the all-important medical board. Previous experience had enabled me to pick up some valuable tips on how to pick up good scores in the various tests. I could stand on one leg with my eyes shut for minutes at a time, could hold my breath for what seemed like hours, turning a pretty shade of beetroot the while, and could blow up the mercury column and hold it with the best of them.

At the E.F.T.S. at Anstey, near Coventry, I was taken up by the chief flying instructor who proceeded to do a most alarming series of aerobatics. Fortunately I had the presence of mind to keep my eyes shut, though I turned pale green. I was immensely gratified to find that the C.F.I. made himself feel extremely ill in the process of testing my stomach, in fact he was definitely greener than I was.

Our course was photographed. I watched one of the instructors stick a copy of the print on the wall at the end of a line of similar photographs of the courses which had preceded ours. Looking at the rows of unsmiling faces I noticed that many of them had bowler hats pencilled in on their heads, whilst others had pencilled ellipses above theirs.

He explained that the bowler-hatted ones had failed the course, whilst the ones with the haloes had been killed. I resolved that no bowler hat was going to appear on *my* head, and, if I could possibly avoid it, no halo either.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

In order to prevent the enemy landing gliders on the aerodrome during the hours of darkness, a number of second-hand cars had been purchased, and at dusk these were parked all over the landing ground. At first they were driven under their own power, but later one or two vital parts were removed; a carburettor here, a distributor there. After a while some of them had to be towed out, then they all had to be towed, and finally, when they began to lose the very tyres off their wheels they were dragged out by tractor.

One night just after dusk a Bristol Blenheim circled the field. Ignoring the frantic shower of red Very lights from the control tower he proceeded to land amongst the cars, taxied to the watch office, dropped a passenger, then took off again. After that no one bothered to drag the cars out at night.

The red Very lights were extremely useful. After dusk many of the airmen would cycle down to the local pub. The first to go down would carry the Very pistol, and if he saw the local constable hanging about he would fire the pistol into the air. This would warn the airmen following to switch on their bicycle lamps. Batteries were hard to come by, and had to be conserved as far as possible. . . .

The navigation instructor greeted us with a worried face one morning. A signal from Flying Training Command had informed him, via the chief ground instructor, that a map inspector was coming in the afternoon. All the maps had to be carefully sorted out and cleaned up, track lines rubbed out, bearings and notes erased, tears mended, creases ironed out.

By the afternoon the herculean task was completed, and the weary instructor, wearing his best service dress, was ready to confront any number of map inspectors.

A small saloon car drove up and from it emerged the inspector, but he had not come to see the maps. He was a M.A.P. inspector, and the Ministry of Aircraft Production had sent him to inspect the aircraft!

Having been taught to fly Tiger Moths, we were posted to

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Cranwell. Here my career as a fighter pilot received another set-back as I was put on to twin-engined aircraft, with a view to becoming a bomber pilot. It was pointed out that with my previous medical history of airsickness I would be less prone to tummy upsets in a bomber. I protested vigorously, and proved my point by going up in a twin-engined aircraft and being sick. After a while I went on to Masters, single-engined fighter trainers, and was a step nearer achieving my ambition.

When I first started flying and found that it made me feel very ill, I used to use a variation of the Coué method of auto-suggestion. Saying to myself firmly, "I will not be ill, I shall be perfectly all right," I would get airborne and be very far from all right. Later some intensive reading made me realise that I was invoking the law of reversed effort, and instead of will-power I tried using imagination. I would try to imagine myself as an iron-stomached individual, and did my best to keep this picture firmly in my mind's eye. With the aid of a broad, tight belt, and doses of glucose, I managed to cope perfectly satisfactorily, but I never completely got over the tendency to feel sick.

The Miles Master was a very nice aeroplane, and was, of course, much more complicated than the Tiger Moth. There was an elaborate cockpit drill to be learned. One day after carrying out some flying practices I was on the last leg of my approach to land when I saw a red flare. A cadet was always detailed to be on the aerodrome perimeter when flying training was in progress, and if anyone came in to land having forgotten to put his wheels down, then the cadet would poop off a red.

I suddenly realised that the warning horn in the cockpit was nearly blowing my head off, and I was about to land with my wheels up. I pushed everything forward, went round again and landed. Feeling a little shaky after nearly making a complete fool of myself, I reached down for the lever to pull up the flaps. A raucous, shatteringly loud noise and two bright red lights informed me that I had pulled up the wrong lever and

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

had started the hydraulic mechanism which retracted the wheels. Like a flash I pushed the lever down again so quickly that the aircraft still remained on its wheels. Such behaviour was technically known as 'Finger trouble', and I had been very lucky indeed to escape being awarded the 'Most Highly Derogatory Order of the Irremovable Finger'.

After this I always tried to fly with my finger well out.

The worst case of finger trouble I encountered occurred when a certain gentleman was detailed to fly from Andover to a spot about fifteen miles away in order to practise an exercise with the Army. He set off in a Hurricane and got himself hopelessly lost. Finally he found himself over the south coast and headed due north. He was searching for his home base when suddenly his engine coughed, spat, and finally cut out. He chose a ploughed field, and selected full flap, leaving his wheels up. He made his approach rather faster than he had anticipated, over-shot, and landed on an aerodrome, which he hadn't observed before. When he landed he discovered that he had got his wheels down instead of flaps, so the Hurricane was undamaged.

He rang Andover from the watch office, saying that he had force-landed at Netheravon. Andover asked him if he had remembered to switch over fuel tanks, and he said he'd forgotten that. He was told to stay where he was and he would be fetched back. After a few hours had passed he rang Andover again to find out where the hell they had got to. They told him that they had been to Netheravon and where the hell had *he* got to? So he enquired where he was, and they told him. Middle Wallop.

Finally the end of the course came, and we had our 'Wings' parade.

At the Operational Training Unit I flew my beloved Spitfires at last. They were all I had hoped for, and more. I had a very narrow escape from crashing into the sea during some air-firing exercises. It was a very hot, hazy day. The sky was blue, exactly the colour of the water. I lost sight of the horizon in the

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

haze and after making my attack on the target started to dive towards the sea, having mistaken it for the sky. Somehow I realised what had happened just in time. It was a nasty moment.

Another anxious moment happened a few days later. A member of my course failed to get airborne at the end of the runway. The plane crashed at high speed and ploughed through hedges, across a road and then hit a wall. The pilot was very dead indeed. Apparently he had not carried out his cockpit drill properly and had tried to take off with the airscrew in coarse pitch. This is like trying to drive a car away from a standstill in top gear, and then immediately trying to climb a hill before it has gained speed.

Two hours later I was taking off in the same sort of aircraft, an unfamiliar type, when I realised that the engine was detonating badly. A glance at the revolution counter showed that the airscrew had suddenly gone into coarse pitch of its own accord, although the pitch lever was fully forward. I was more than half-way along the runway and nearly at flying speed. Before I had time to throttle back and wait for the crash the pitch suddenly changed again into fully fine, I got airborne, and landed safely. The trouble had been caused by a minor defect, easily rectified, but not in time to prevent one man being killed and another forcibly reminded of the proximity of the next world.

On Saturday afternoons young cadets of the Air Training Corps would come to the aerodrome and were often shown over the aircraft. A Wellington bomber was being inspected on the tarmac when one of the dear little fellows climbed inside and found the flare gun. Naturally he had to fire it off inside the fuselage, and the Wimpey caught fire and was reduced to a blackened skeleton. The captain of the aircraft was beside himself with rage, and was in favour of hanging, drawing and quartering the little lad responsible. His feelings at this moment were as nothing compared with how he felt when they court-

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

martialled him for not having made certain that the flare gun had been unloaded!

When I arrived at my squadron I found myself in the unusual position of being comparatively neat and tidy whilst the other pilots dressed for comfort, not without a certain studied inelegance, I thought.

The wire came out of my cap on the first day and my top button was undone and remained so for the rest of my service career. A white turtle-necked sweater worn under the tunic seemed *de rigueur*. That desirable battered effect on the cap was obtained by flying with it crammed down the side of the cockpit. The ensemble was completed by high black leather flying boots, worn with a map stuffed in them. It was essential to be always conspicuously in need of a haircut.

These boots were of a special 'escape' variety. The tops were designed to be cut off by means of a small knife which was sewn into the leather. With the tops removed they made an excellent pair of shoes. As I took a six, and the smallest size was a seven, I had to wear two pairs of thick socks inside mine. Later on I was to be very glad of this.

At that time the general feeling was that as long as we were well disciplined in the air what we did on the ground was not so important.

The squadron leader hated office work, but of course it had to be done. The adjutant would periodically give him stacks of papers to sign: reports, letters and orders. One day the following notice appeared on the board. "I, the undersigned, hereby declare that I never read a damned thing that is put in front of me." It had been duly signed by the squadron leader. . . .

Our aircraft deliveries were carried out by the A.T.A., a very fine group of pilots. A woman pilot of this organisation, holding the rank of third officer, was going to have a baby. They wanted to stop her flying when the baby was well on the way, but she realised the importance of the job she was doing

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

and insisted on carrying on, claiming that there was nothing in the regulations to stop her. One day a notice went up on the board, stating that according to regulation No. 35 she must cease all flying duties forthwith. Regulation No. 35 was looked up, and read, "Third officers are not allowed to carry passengers."

It was a great thrill to be able to take an active, personal part in the war. I had always regarded air fighting as a return to war as it should be, the object being either to kill or be killed. I do not think I was a particularly morbid person, but it just never occurred to me that I might survive. Several of my closest friends were killed, and I regarded it as just a matter of time as far as I was concerned.

We were in a busy sector and for a while flew from Middle Wallop, Tangmere and Warmwell, and often made contact with the enemy. The Germans used a radio frequency very near ours, and we could sometimes hear German voices on our R.T. It was a wonderful experience, being able to help to prevent British civilians from being bombed. Long hours would be spent at readiness, then a telephone call from 'ops', or perhaps a double red flare from the watch office, would get us scrambling into the air in hot pursuit of the attacker.

It was all tremendously exciting, and we owed a very great deal to the excellence of the ground control. However, on the first occasion that I needed them desperately, my radio packed up and I had to find for myself.

I had been on a long-range mission with one other plane, which was shot down over the target. The weather closed in as I was returning to base and I was flying too low to use the R.T. I climbed up through the cloud and called up the controller, but the radio was quite dead. I should have to find my own way home, without radio aid.

It was only possible to estimate my position very roughly indeed, as the ground was quite invisible, but I set an approximate course for base and when my estimated time of

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

arrival arrived, plunged down into the cloud, which was ten-tenths without any sign of a break. Down and down, visibility was still zero. The altimeter finally showed two hundred feet above the level of the home base, which was at sea level, I knew. Still no sign of a break. By now I was flying in fully fine pitch, as slowly as possible, with wheels down and full flap. Without losing sight of the blind flying panel I tried to discern a break in the cloud out of the corner of my eye, but still no sign.

At length the altimeter showed *minus* fifty feet, and I still hadn't hit anything. Finally, still letting down very slowly I suddenly discerned waves a few feet away, a very nasty moment indeed, and instantly climbed up into the overcast again. The altimeter reading was *minus* two hundred feet. I re-set it—obviously the barometric pressure had altered since I set the instrument on the ground before take-off, and thus a false reading had resulted.

The next problem was which direction to fly in order to reach land. I might be over either the North Sea or the Channel, so England lay somewhere between north and west, but which way? If I were over the Channel and flew west I might not hit land, and if I were now over the North Sea and flew north I shouldn't strike land either. I flew west, and a minute or two later, cautiously descending again, I saw dry land beneath. A drizzling rain was falling and the cloud was almost down to the ground, so I made a precautionary landing in a field which, as it turned out, was on the edge of a cliff. As I taxied the aircraft the engine spluttered and died. Fuel had run out.

A car drove up a few minutes later, and it was only then that I knew for certain I had landed in England. When I notified operations by telephone that I had landed they were very upset because I had not been plotted by radar. "Perhaps," said the controller, "you were flying rather low?" I agreed that perhaps I had been.

One day, having just returned from a sweep, I was examining

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

my aircraft for possible damage when I looked up and saw a pair of piercing eyes, beneath bushy brows, watching intently. They belonged to an elderly gentleman wearing R.A.F. uniform with stove-pipe trousers, and with the largest number of gongs on his chest and the most scrambled egg on his hat that I have ever seen. He seated himself on a shooting-stick and told me to carry on. He turned out to be Marshal of the R.A.F. The Viscount Trenchard, G.C.B., G.C.V.O., and it was he who had founded the R.A.F.

The squadron flew off to an armament practice camp for some air-firing exercises. Exploring the local countryside one evening we came across an attractive inn. Drinks were ordered, but when the time to pay for them arrived, the cost was simply terrific. The manager was sent for, and explained that the reason for charging five shillings for a single whisky was because Clark Gable was staying at the inn. The squadron leader, who was renowned for his 'line shooting', exclaimed, "Well, I'm Squadron Leader X., D.S.O., D.F.C. and bar, and have shot down twenty-eight enemy aircraft. Now put the price of the beer up fourpence. Clark Gable, indeed!" As he finished speaking the great Clark Gable himself, wearing riding clothes, entered. He proved to be a very good sort, and we afterwards met him several times.

There was an excellent rough shoot near-by, and I paid a visit to the owner to see if permission could be obtained to use it. His wife told me that he was bedridden at the moment, but that he would be delighted to see me if I cared to come up to his bedroom. I was ushered into the bedroom, where the gentleman was sitting up in bed drinking a very large whisky and soda. He was three parts drunk, and by the side of his bed was a large table laden with a vast number of bottles. I have frequently seen public bars with a far smaller stock. He offered me a drink and was most kind and helpful. It transpired that he was kept in bed by a severe attack of gout, caused by excessive drinking, and I could readily believe it

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

when he cheerfully told me he expected to be confined to bed for some time.

Sitting round in the mess one evening we were drinking hock, out of tankards, when somebody said:

“Do you realise we are drinking hock?”

“Why not? It tastes as good out of a tankard as out of a glass.”

“No, what I mean is that it's a German drink.”

“So it is, still, don't worry; we're interning it, aren't we?”

I was never fond of dancing, but my flight decided to visit a local ‘hop’ and so of course I came too. Dancing with a pleasant-looking young girl, I noticed that her hair smelt very strongly of hospitals. On being asked if she were a nurse she replied that she was, but how did I know? I replied that I thought she must be a nurse because she had such a kind face, and obviously a very sympathetic nature. She tittered at this rather laboured compliment, and told me that she worked at the local children's hospital.

“As a matter of fact,” she said, “I'm on duty tonight in the ward.”

“How on earth did you manage to get here, then?”

“Oh, it was easy. I just put some dope in the cocoa, and there won't be another peep out of the little b—s until morning!”

There was another occasion when I slipped up rather badly on my judgment, too. We were flying at the time from an aerodrome not very far from Aldershot, and a few of us decided to go to one of the local theatres.

During the first half of the performance a combination of boredom and thirst drove me into a small bar by the side of the stage. Sitting in the bar was a very charming young lady, sipping a lemonade with exquisite refinement. It appeared that she was one of the artistes, and that her act opened the second half of the bill. We talked for a few minutes, then she had to go to get ready. She said that my companions

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

and I must be sure to be in our seats when the tabs rose.

She disappeared through a door which led backstage, then came the intermission and I was joined by my friends. I told them that I had just met an extraordinarily nice girl—those were my exact words—and that we must be sure to be promptly in our places at the end of the intermission. She was probably going to do something very special for our benefit.

The orchestra played the opening music for the second half, we were all in our seats and the curtains parted. There she stood, wearing a R.A.F. hat and nothing else. A banner behind her proclaimed the words, 'Salute to the R.A.F.'

For weeks afterwards I was sick and tired of being asked, "Met any more extraordinarily nice girls lately?"

One of the squadron's duties was convoy escort, an interesting and sometimes exciting job; especially as some of the naval anti-aircraft gunners were not very good at aircraft recognition and frequently opened fire at us as we flew towards them. We used to make strenuous efforts to exhibit our distinctive ellipsoidal wing shape, and fired off flares which conformed to the colour of the day.

Arrangements were made for one of the squadron pilots to spend three days on a convoy. He expected to pick up useful tips and intended to have some heart-to-heart talks with some of the gunners on the subject of recognition. He was rather looking forward to the trip, he said, it would be a nice rest cure after the strain of operational flying.

The first day out from port his ship was torpedoed and he spent the night on a raft. He decided to stick to flying in future, it was more restful.

An onlooker on the ground sees an aircraft soaring high up in the blue and envies the pilot his bird-like freedom; but the pilot, trussed up in his uncomfortable and cumbersome safety equipment and with a difficult and sometimes strenuous job to do, may well be envying the man on the ground.

Aerobatics throw a very great strain on the body, and

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

'blacking out' was a rather horrible sensation until you got used to it. Contrary to general belief, aerobatics were not usually employed in air-fighting, although we were trained to perform them. If we dived on to a German aircraft from behind, he would usually stuff his nose hard down. If we copied this manœuvre in a Spitfire the engine cut, so we had to do a barrel roll as we dived to keep the engine running properly. At very high speed this was quite an effort. Later we had injection type carburettors and this manœuvre became unnecessary.

I rather fancied myself as an aerobatic pilot, and when I was asked to show off the paces of a new aircraft to some Very Important Personages I was highly gratified.

Before the exhibition I practised all the more spectacular evolutions, which included doing a prolonged slow roll whilst flying at high speed at a very low altitude across the aerodrome. Special permission had to be obtained to do this.

When I came to do the show in front of the V.I.P.s, I had just got the aircraft over on to its back when it began to judder violently. I was just on the verge of a high speed stall. Somehow the evolution was completed, though I almost scraped the ground with a wing and badly frightened both myself and the onlookers.

What had happened was that the engine had lost power, owing to lead-fouling on the plugs, and I was not going quite fast enough to complete the stunt.

The V.I.P.s did not notice anything wrong, but the station commander told me that his heart almost stopped when I did that slow roll. I told him truthfully that the fright he experienced was nothing to the shock I gave myself!

Mishaps were usually attributed to the machinations of a tribe of tiny, invisible little men called 'gremlins'. It was always a gremlin who unscrewed the throttle nut just as you were taking off and nearly caused a crash. If you approached the airfield at too high a speed hundreds of little gremlins

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

would hold up the plane in the air and run like mad with it so that you were unable to land.

After the war gremlins were demobilised, and are now busily engaged in turning down the volume of the car radio when you drive under a bridge, or in holding up the fronts of strapless evening gowns.

We had a pilot who was an inveterate wangler and could always fix anything. One day his posting came through. He was to go to a place in the extreme north of Scotland, and he did not want to go a bit. Not a moment was wasted in getting down to work. He telephoned a friend at Air Ministry, he sent a telegram to an uncle at the War Office. Letters, telegrams, signals, phone calls, all were sent in a frantic effort to avoid this posting to the wilds.

Then we gently broke the news that he was not really posted at all, it was all a joke. It cured him of wangling for at least three days.

Landing after a sortie, one of the flight commanders had forgotten to turn his gun-button besel ring to the 'safe' position, and he fired his cannon by mistake when on the last leg of his approach. This narrowly missed some of the ground crew, and they were none too pleased about it.

A week later he did it again, but this time we were ready for him. Shortly after he landed a telephone message arrived from the local police, saying that terrible carnage had been wrought by exploding cannon shells in the near-by town, more details would follow. The worried flight commander anxiously waited by the telephone until it rang again. This time there were some details of the destruction and he was most upset. A few minutes later yet another call announced that a bouncing baby had been blown out of its pram, and was still bouncing. It was only then that he realised that he was having his leg pulled.

When my first tour of operations was completed I was sent on rest, and for a short while taught air-fighting tactics at a

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

training establishment at Fairwood Common, not far from Swansea. The camp was in a rather remote spot, and life there seemed to be in danger of getting a little dull after the hectic excitement of a squadron.

Close by was a house belonging to some friends, a young married couple who very kindly allowed me to use their home. They were often away, and used to leave the front door key hung up for me in a shed in the garden. I used to come in sometimes in the evenings and sit by the fire; it made a pleasant change from the noisy mess, where the piano was pounded incessantly, often with the radio going full blast as well, and it was considered bad form to relax.

One evening three friends and I drove some miles away to the nearest large town and painted it a delicate shade of pink. Unfortunately the pubs closed at ten p.m. and we had nowhere to go. A kindly barman had sold us a bottle of whisky, and so I suggested adjourning to my friend's house to finish it off. When we got there no one was in, so I went out to the shed in the garden to get the key. For some mysterious reason it was not on the nail; however, it was a simple matter to open the front door, using a piece of celluloid from the front of somebody's wallet.

Glasses were produced and the corkscrew sought. When I came back to the lounge with that highly useful implement in my hand I discovered that the bottle had already been opened, by the simple expedient of banging it on the wall until the cork flew out. Most unfortunately the house did not seem to be very well built, and in the process of the banging operations the bottle had gone clean through the wall. Still, the cork was out, and one could always hang a picture over the hole.

We settled down to drink the whisky, utilising two glasses, a cut-glass bowl and a scent spray to drink it out of. Apparently if you drink out of a scent spray the spirit gets atomised, which is a good thing, though in all fairness I must say that I do not recommend it.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Next morning I telephoned the lady of the house at her office, and told her what had happened. She was glad to hear that we had enjoyed ourselves, but unfortunately she and her husband had now moved and had left the house a few days before. She had intended to tell me, but it had slipped her memory. We had therefore been trespassing. She promised to ring up her landlord at once and explain what had happened, then everything would be all right.

A few days later I was telephoned by the station adjutant, who told me to keep out of sight for goodness' sake, because there was a police officer on the camp looking for me, with a warrant for my arrest for house-breaking! It appeared that one of the neighbours had recognised me as I left the house. The landlord had arrived on the following morning, had been buttonholed by the neighbour, and the result was that I was now a fugitive from justice.

Once more I telephoned my friend, and she said that she could not understand what had happened, the whole thing had been explained to the landlord, who had quite understood. She gave me his address, and I went to see him, taking great care to avoid the police.

It seemed advisable to find out something about this landlord first, so I went to the nearest pub to his house and did some detective work. Discreet enquiries produced the information that his nearest and dearest friend was sitting in the far corner. I made his acquaintance, plied him with gin and peppermint, and learnt a great deal about his friend and my enemy, the landlord.

It took quite a lot of gin and pep to get to the truth of the matter, but at length I discovered that the landlord was really only a tenant himself, and was not allowed to sublet. When the real landlord had discovered the damage to the wall, and was informed by the neighbour that I had broken into the place, he at once got in touch with his tenant, who had disclaimed all knowledge of the occurrence.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

The police were informed, and the warrant issued. When my friend contacted the man she supposed was the true landlord, he was afraid that the fact of his illegal subletting would become known, so did not pass the true facts on to the proper authorities.

Armed with this knowledge, I interviewed the false landlord. I told him that unless he told the police what really happened so that they dropped the charges against me I could not be responsible for keeping his secret. He agreed so quickly, and seemed so agitated, that I think he must have had a lot more to hide than I realised!

## CHAPTER THREE

THE REST PERIOD WAS OVER, and I reported for duty with a fighter squadron which was going to take part in the invasion of France.

We lived under canvas on an airfield in the south of England, at least we were supposed to, in order to 'harden' us up, but we did not take very kindly to this idea, and many of us preferred to sleep in London in comfortable hotels, arriving at the camp first thing in the morning. We thought that it was a good thing to enjoy luxury while we could still do so, anticipating that we would have hard living forced upon us soon enough—and how right we were. . . .

The squadron motto (unofficial) was *Nil illegitimus carbonundum*, which roughly translated means 'Don't let the blighters grind you down'.

We were expecting to do some very high altitude work, so I had to undergo a decompression test. The test took place at Oxford, and I was put into a steel chamber—the air pressure inside being gradually reduced to simulate high altitude conditions. When we got to the equivalent of about 30,000 feet I had bad pains and had to have the pressure increased. Another attempt was made, but I still couldn't cope, I definitely got 'bends', due to nitrogen bubbles in the blood.

On arriving back at the squadron they asked me if I'd had the test and I said I had, and that was all there was to it. I flew regularly at 40,000 feet without any trace of the 'bends'. I suppose the medical people must have forgotten to notify the squadron that I'd failed the test.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Naturally when eight miles up the pilot was completely dependent on his oxygen supply. If that failed he would quickly lose consciousness. We had lost two pilots who just flew away and never came back, and their loss was attributed to oxygen failure.

One day I was flying alone 40,000 feet over the Belgian coast. It was a perfectly glorious day. I could see for two hundred and fifty miles. Far below a day-bombing raid was taking place, and away in the distance the Isle of Wight was clearly visible. Next thing I knew was that I was flying along a very long, very straight road, only a couple of hundred feet up. I had no idea where I was, or how I got there. Now and again light flak would open up at me, and once I flew over a town and all hell broke loose. It was exactly like a dream, I had no sensation of danger or even of reality. After a while I realised I was being called on the radio. Climbing a little I spoke to the controller. He realised what had happened and 'talked' me back to base. Apparently I sounded exactly as though I were drunk. I had experienced a complete oxygen failure and the miracle was that I had survived. I was unable to read my compass or set my directional gyro, so he told me to keep the sun on my left and fly steadily, giving me further directions as I got nearer home. The radio conversation had been listened in to by the squadron, and I expected to get my leg pulled unmercifully, but not a word was said, except that they were glad to see me back.

My best friend at this time was Woody. He was very tall and dark, with a fierce little moustache and a great deal of charm. A first-class artist, he intended to specialise in technical art after the war. Very much a ladies' man, he would somehow manage to give a girl the impression that he was possessed of infinite attraction. I can see him now, returning to the mess ante-room after answering the fifth telephone call from a girl that evening, grinning all over his face, and saying, "Poor little moths!"

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

When D-Day came, Woody was an early casualty. He was shot down straight into the sea, just off the Normandy beach-head.

Very soon we were under canvas alongside an airstrip in Normandy. There was quite a lot of fighting on the ground and sometimes we felt much safer in the air. Most of us had dysentery badly, but morale was very high. We used to fly drop-tanks full of beer in from England, and Camembert cheese soon found its way on to the tables of London hotels.

When we were first flying from the beach-head we slept under canvas, at least we had tents, and as soon as the dysentery got better we slept in them. As we moved across France it was sometimes possible to get into billets, and on one occasion we found ourselves sleeping in a very elegant château. Only the previous night our beds had been occupied by Luftwaffe pilots.

There was a fine ballroom, and obviously the only possible thing to do was to have a party. Preferably a party to end all parties. This it very nearly did.

Drink was no problem at all. Someone disappeared with a jeep and turned up a few hours later with a vast quantity of assorted wines, spirits and liqueurs. Obviously it would be only polite to ask some of the local ladies to come along, and in a burst of over-enthusiasm someone asked the mayor and mayoress, together with a few other important locals.

There was a young ladies' finishing school in the neighbourhood, and our commanding officer invited the mistresses and girls to come along to this very select ball we were giving. To avoid the possibility of a woman-shortage, the M.T. officer sent a couple of motor coaches down to the town, and they came back filled with the more friendly type of girl.

The atmosphere at the beginning of the evening was hardly conducive to conviviality. The company was arrayed in disapproving groups, all glaring at each other, and the evening appeared doomed to complete failure. Then the champagne

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

cup was served. This far-from-innocuous beverage had been made from constituents of an unprecedented variety and potency. True, the taste was nauseating, but the results were admirable. The company thawed like the proverbial snowball in hell, and an excellent time was had by all.

The headmistress of the finishing school gave orders for her girls to be taken home before they were finished entirely, but fortunately the M.T. officer could not understand her, and shortly afterwards she gracefully passed into merciful oblivion. I had the pleasure and privilege of seeing someone bite off the tie of an Air Marshal, and the mayor, who was having the time of his life, was heard to assure the company that the Luftwaffe never gave parties like this.

The following morning I was asked if I would mind flying a couple of U.S. Air Force pilots back to their base. They had crash-landed a Flying Fortress on our airfield the night before, had of course attended the party, and now wanted to return home.

We climbed into the Auster, and one American said to the other, "You know, I've never flown in one of these before." His buddy replied, "Me neither." "That's an odd coincidence," I said, "Me neither."

We all laughed heartily and I really believe that the Americans thought I was kidding. However, I soon freed them completely from any such illusions.

Taking a look round the cockpit, there seemed to be one or two unusual features. The throttle lever was a knob which had to be pulled in and out and worked in the reverse direction to that of my Spitfire, the wheel-brakes were worked by little buttons on the floor, and, of course, there was no flap lever to worry about.

I started the engine, which sounded like a bag of nails to me, taxied out, and then I opened the throttle fully, and we started the take-off. Although I had never flown in one of these aircraft before I had always had the idea that they

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

needed a very short take-off run. This particular plane seemed to be the exception, which was a pity because the crashed Fortress was at the far end of the field and would have to be cleared.

The tail came up, but we were still far from reaching flying speed. I gave a push to the throttle, and the roar of the engine promptly died. I had closed it by mistake. Hastily I re-opened the throttle and somehow heaved the aircraft and its three petrified occupants off the deck. For several long moments it seemed that we were not going to clear the Fortress, but we did, and slowly we gained height.

I set course for the American base, but the indicated air speed seemed very slow. We were flying straight and level on full throttle and only doing about seventy-five miles per hour. The Fortress pilot in the seat behind me tapped me on the shoulder, and licked his dry lips: "Tell me," he shouted, "do you always fly with full flap?" He pointed out of the window, and there I could see the flaps were fully down, in the landing position. There was a long lever just above my head, on the left, which I had overlooked when familiarising myself with the cockpit lay-out.

I raised the flaps, trying rather unsuccessfully to look as though I had intended to anyway, and finished the trip with a landing which was more of an arrival than a three-pointer.

Now and again we would help out the security officer by giving a hand with the censoring of letters. I was greatly intrigued to notice that it seemed customary to put strange combinations of initial letters on the back of the envelope.

F.I.N.L.A.N.D., H.O.L.L.A.N.D., I.T.A.L.Y., S.W.A.L.K.—all very mysterious. Apparently they referred to the phrases: 'Friendship is never lost and never dies,' 'Hope our love lingers and never dies,' and 'I trust and love you.' S.W.A.L.K. always seemed to me to take a lot for granted from the censor, who had to stick down the envelope. It stood for 'Sealed with a loving kiss'. B.O.L.T.O.P. I never did fathom.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Near one of our airfields was a ramp which had been used by the Germans for launching flying bombs. A friend and I decided to have a good look at this, and we borrowed a utility truck and set off. Leaving the truck at the roadside, we explored the site, and suddenly, without the slightest warning, there was a deafening explosion, and I was knocked flat on my face. About fifty yards away I could see my companion. He had stepped on an anti-tank mine and exploded it. Incredibly enough he was only slightly injured. Both ear-drums were perforated, and he had to come off flying, but his body was only slightly cut and bruised. Our utility truck, several hundred yards away, had the roof blown clean off!

Paris was just being liberated. Accompanied by three other members of the squadron I set off in a jeep to see the fun. It was a long drive, and dusk was falling as we drove into the city. We were greeted by members of the Maquis, who wore armlets and brandished a selection of firearms. They told us that Paris was now free, although we might still run into a certain amount of street fighting.

Everyone seemed to be overjoyed to see us, and we were well and truly feted, despite the fact that the public electricity supply was cut off. Once we got mixed up with some street fighting, and the headlamps of the jeep were shot out, but little damage resulted. It was an unforgettable night.

We had a lot of fun with the Frenchmen translating R.A.F. expressions into literal French. *Piece of cake, round the bend, wizard prang*. They found the last particularly difficult to comprehend until they learned that the engine of a Spitfire was called a 'Merlin'.

In return we were taught some useful phrases of *argot*, which years later came in handy for dealing with French taxi drivers.

We arranged to rendezvous at dawn at the Avenue George V, but only two of my companions returned to the jeep. We were just debating whether to leave the third to his fate when we heard a breathless shout and he came running at top speed

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

towards us, hotly pursued by an irate Frenchman who brandished a bottle and seemed to hold a grudge of some sort. We swung our prodigal aboard and hastily started on the long drive back to the airfield.

On the very last trip of my second tour of operations my aircraft received a direct hit from flak, full in the engine. I was on a low-level attack, and was east of the Rhine. The engine cut dead and another shell tore a hole in the port wing. I was too low to use a parachute and I was convinced that I'd 'had it'. I was obviously going to have a very high-speed crash, and even if I survived I would get some very rough handling from the German troops. I could hardly expect them to behave in a particularly civilised manner towards the pilot who a few moments before had been killing their comrades with cannon shells.

So this was it. Well, at least I had the satisfaction of discovering that in the face of death I felt no desire at all to pray. I felt an absolutely certain conviction that this would be the very last thing I should ever know, that beyond lay complete, perpetual oblivion.

The plane was almost, but not quite, out of control. I jettisoned the cockpit hood and managed to pull out of the dive just before I hit the ground. A few moments later I was a prisoner, having had a miraculous escape.

The German troops were well disciplined and behaved perfectly. I was taken to a farmhouse under a strong guard, having sustained only minor injuries. So began my adventures in Germany.

## CHAPTER FOUR

FOR A FEW DAYS I WAS HELD IN THE FARMHOUSE. One of the guards was quite friendly. He was an Austrian and was convinced that Germany was '*Kaput*'. I was put up in a loft, with a dirty straw palliasse, a vast number of rats, and some very affectionate lice. Food was practically non-existent, but the Austrian used to smuggle me in a little of his own food, usually a rather weird-tasting stew, full of garlic.

He was a trombone player and at night often used to play in the band at the officers' mess, not far away. They were not allowed to play jazz, which was considered decadent, and it was years since he had learned anything new worth playing. It was to my advantage to keep on friendly terms with him, so I wrote out a simplified piano score of all I could remember of a tune called 'Getting sentimental over you', which makes an excellent trombone solo. For good measure I could not resist putting in a few bars of the well known 'Colonel Bogey'. I was taken away before the arrangement for the full band, based on my score, was finished, so I never found out whether those German officers ever recognised the trombone playing 'and the same to you' at them, but it was a pleasant thought—childish, perhaps, but it cheered me up a bit.

One night the Austrian told me that I was being taken away in the morning, and he answered some questions I put to him regarding the local topography. He asked me for my address in England, and said he would write after the war. Surprisingly enough he kept his promise. He is now a member of a broadcasting band in Vienna.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

That night I slept even less than usual. I was determined to do my best to escape in the morning whilst still comparatively near the frontier. In a few days' time I should be a long way further inside Germany, and escape would be a thousand times more difficult.

At dawn the sergeant came in. "*Raus, raus,*" he shouted, and I jumped to my feet, feeling more than a little nervous. The escort fell in outside, and I was marched off up the road. The guard had told me that we should have to pass over a small railway embankment. When we reached this I vaulted the low parapet and dived into one of the viaduct tunnels.

My object was to cross underneath the railway line through the tunnel, but unluckily the one I chose did not go right through the embankment and I was easily caught.

For the next part of the journey I was taken by car. It was pleasant to observe how complete was the air-superiority of the Allies. One of the guards had to ride on one of the front wings of the car, lying at full length on his back and scanning the sky for our aircraft. A line of rocket-carrying Tempests came over; about six of them, flying in line abreast and about one hundred and fifty yards apart. There were frantic cries of "*Achtung*" and my captors stopped the car and piled out almost before it had stopped. They told me to stay inside, and they crouched in a near-by ditch, guns trained on me in case I tried to escape.

One of the Tempests peeled off, and I rather expected him to shoot up the car, perhaps with cannon fire—it was hardly worth a rocket. Then another, and another, peeled off and I saw that they were attacking a ground target a little distance away. I am not sure what the target was, I think it was a flying-bomb site. There were many round there.

When the attack was over the Germans got back into the car, trying to look as though they had intended to get out anyway. I asked them where the Luftwaffe was, but they never told me.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

I was put on a train, with a heavily-armed private soldier and a sergeant in charge. I knew they had been warned to take particular care that I did not escape and so was slightly surprised when we reached a small station and they both got out, leaving me alone in the compartment. After a short pause I opened the door and jumped down on to the railway line. I hadn't gone very far before they opened fire at me from the window of the next compartment, where they had been waiting for me to try and escape. I managed to take cover by dropping behind some rails, and was caught again. This time they were taking no chances, and I was not only handcuffed, but my flying boots were taken away. I was very glad then that I had on my two pairs of socks.

A small transit camp was the next stop, and for a few days I was in a small room with fourteen other prisoners, mainly British and Canadian officers and men. Each day we received one small very dark brown sour loaf, which had to be divided amongst fifteen, with the aid of a penknife, which someone was clever enough to have retained.

As the senior officer, in rank if not years, it was my doubtful privilege to cut up the loaf into fifteen equal portions. This was a very lengthy process, and everyone in the room watched me closely. First of all the loaf would be cut exactly in half, then each half was bisected, and so on until I had sixteen equal slices. We each then had one slice and the ceremony was repeated with the slice left over. This left a tiny square, one-sixteenth of a slice in size, and this was given to the man who was deemed by the majority to have the smallest ration.

Two more prisoners arrived, but most fortunately for me I left the same day, and was put on a train *en route* for Frankfurt. At least I avoided the problem of having to divide the loaf up into seventeen equal pieces.

We arrived at Frankfurt just as an air-raid was starting. We all had to go to a shelter, the first time I had ever been in one. I was not very anxious to be recognised as a R.A.F. pilot.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Unfortunately the German civilians noticed me, but incredibly enough I was not molested. In my halting German I told them that I was not a bomber pilot, but a fighter pilot. I told them I hated air-raids, which was quite true, and that my mother and father had recently been killed in a raid on London, which was quite untrue. It seemed to do the trick, and the angry growling died down. Somehow I don't think my escort would have worried very much if I had been lynched.

I wonder what would have happened to a Luftwaffe pilot discovered in an air-raid shelter in London during the blitz?

I noticed that when my guards bought themselves sandwiches at the railway station they had to give up food coupons for them, and they all seemed very badly off for supplies generally; even the bandages which covered my minor injuries were ersatz, made of *crêpe* paper, and kept slipping. The coffee, which was the only drink I was given, tasted as though it were made of acorns. Most probably it was.

From Frankfurt I was taken to the main interrogation centre, where I was to undergo a very unpleasant time for six weeks. I was searched on arrival and the search was most certainly not lacking in thoroughness. It was interesting to observe that they knew exactly where to look for many of the more secret gadgets we carried. Two of my buttons were magnetised, so that they could be used as compasses. They found these, and also another tiny compass I had hidden under a wound dressing.

I was put into a tiny cell, containing a plank bed and a very small, thin blanket. After a preliminary interview, when I gave my name, rank, and number, I got three weeks solitary confinement. The first week of this was absolute hell. I had never sat still before with nothing to do, and the days passed incredibly slowly. I had no idea how long it was going on for, but sincerely hoped it would not be very much longer. By the end of the first week I began to get accustomed to it and after three weeks I was quite prepared to continue indefinitely.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

I would ponder on deep, philosophical questions, such as "Who am I, and what is it within me wants to know?"

I later discovered that someone else once spent fifty-three years in deep contemplation on this particular problem, without discovering the answer, so perhaps it is not surprising that I failed to solve the mystery myself!

I had no idea how long the solitary confinement was going to last, and I never discovered whether it was a punishment for my attempted escapes, or whether it was an attempt to try to soften me up so that at my next interview I should be a little more talkative.

Suddenly I was sent for and informed that I was now officially a prisoner of war, coming under the Geneva Convention. This meant that they were not going to interrogate me any further.

Next followed a few days in a transit camp. One night we had the usual air-raid warning, and Mosquito pathfinder aircraft flew over and neatly ringed the entire camp with target-marker flares. This caused consternation amongst the bomber boys, some of whom sweated visibly. The fighter pilots maintained that as we had been picked out as the target we were obviously in the only safe place for miles around. Everyone knew that when it came to accurate bombing Bomber Command just hadn't a clue. Soon the main force were overhead, and bombs fell all around, but not one inside the camp. Some months later, in the prison camp, I met a pilot who had been shot down on this particular raid. He said that in the briefing they had been given the exact location of the camp, and it had been carefully marked out by the pathfinders to avoid killing any of us.

One hundred and fifty officers and men, mostly British and American aircrew, were marched to the railway station. We were packed into one coach of ten compartments, each intended to hold eight people, which was to be our home for the next five days and nights. Again I was very glad of my slender

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

knowledge of the language, as I was made interpreter, which gave me an opportunity to stretch my legs on occasions.

We organised a glee club of about ten voices, mainly Americans who had learned part-singing at college. I can never hear 'Down in the Valley' or 'Grandfather Clock' without vivid memories of that journey.

One of the prisoners, fresh from England, told us how the newspapers had recently reported that a Member of Parliament, travelling on the night train to Scotland, had complained to the House that the travel authorities had forced him to give up his reserved berth to a German prisoner of war, a Luftwaffe pilot. This made us think a bit. . . .

Miraculously, a few Red Cross parcels appeared, otherwise there would have been no food at all.

After a great deal of shatteringly vigorous shunting, and having been attached to a series of good trains, we arrived at our destination, and were soon in the prison camp, official prisoners of war at last.

It was a strange environment in which I found myself. For a time I was regarded with suspicion, as were all new Kriegies (an abbreviation of the German word for prisoners of war). Later I met several fighter pilots who had 'got the chop' from my own wing, and they vouched for me. I might so easily have been a spy. There was certainly enough undercover activity going on in the camp to keep several spies fully engaged, and now and again one was discovered.

In our particular camp, Stalag Luft I, up near the Baltic between Lubeck and Rostock, the supply of Red Cross food parcels was very limited indeed, and the meagre German rations were almost uneatable. It was very difficult at first to think about anything other than food. We used to sit round, describing meals we had eaten, and meals we intended to eat in the future. We dreamed of food, we argued about food. We kicked ourselves for having refused second helpings in the past. It seemed impossible to read a book without coming across

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

mention of food. Sometimes we would try not to think about eating, but this was about as effective as deciding not to think about the pain when having a tooth drilled by some particularly sadistic dentist.

Most of us arrived in the camp with nothing except the clothes we stood up in; often these were torn and burnt.

Scene: A small room in one of the huts. Several newcomers are talking to a senior officer. Enter a recent arrival. His trousers were burnt away when he was shot down and he is wearing a pair of long woollen khaki underpants. "You are improperly dressed," says the senior officer, and explains: "No spurs."

One man was alleged to have baled out carrying a ready packed suitcase, which he had thoughtfully, if pessimistically, brought with him in the aircraft in case of emergency.

A few clothing parcels got through from home, and some came from the International Red Cross. One unfortunate, after waiting nearly two years for a clothing parcel, at last received one. He opened it in eager anticipation and found—white tie and tails! His relatives had thought he might need the dress suit "in case you want to go to a party". There was not even a bar of chocolate in a pocket.

People at home were often amazingly thoughtless and cruel. A pilot whose aircraft had been shot down in flames over Berlin had been the only member of his crew to get out alive. Months later in the prison camp he received a small parcel. It was from some of the relatives of his dead comrades, and it contained just some white feathers and a tin of rat poison.

A hand-knitted sweater was received by a grateful airman prisoner through the Red Cross. The woman who had knitted it had enclosed her address, and the recipient used up one of his precious letter cards to write and thank her. Months later came her reply. "I am sorry to hear that you received my sweater, as I had knitted it for a *fighting* man."

A wife wrote, "I am as happy as can be without you," and

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

the unfortunate recipient of this information had to wait many months until the ambiguity was resolved.

Equally ambiguous but less disturbing was the letter from a kindly aunt who enclosed a calendar and wrote, "I hope you find this very useful as it has several years on it."

A flying officer's wife wrote saying she was sure he wouldn't mind, but she had lent his golf clubs to a German prisoner of war, who had become an honorary member of the local club. He wrote back saying that on no account would he lend his precious clubs to a blasted goon, and she was to get them back immediately. His letter was forwarded to the golf club and he received a letter from the committee telling him that, owing to his unsportsmanlike behaviour, he was no longer a member.

The camp had evolved its own economic system. The basis of the currency was one cigarette, and an elaborate system of barter was built up. If you had some lemon curd in your half of a food parcel but preferred jam, you could go to a trader. He would take your lemon curd and give you jam, but as the former was worth ten cigarettes and the latter only eight, you would have two cigarettes change coming to you, less one, which was the trader's percentage and chargeable on all transactions.

You could sell your watch for cigarettes and buy food with them, or you could save up your food and buy a watch. Everything had its price.

From time to time the occupants of a hut would be turned out into the compound for the best part of a day, whilst the Germans searched for escape material, signs of tunnelling, concealed radios, or other illegalities.

After one such search a guard told us that one trader was found to have a stock of over 100,000 cigarettes!

Each room had a small iron stove. When there was anything to cook we cooked it on the stove, when we had any fuel. One or two prisoners became interested in cooking and were very adept at producing wonderful dishes out of the oddest in-

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

gredients. Their efforts were rather wasted because we were so hungry that it did not matter how the food was cooked or served. We had no difficulty whatever in eating raw potato peelings.

In the American parcels there were large round tins of very creamy milk powder called 'Klim'. A favourite dish was known as 'Glop'. Based on Klim it included condensed milk and anything else either sweet or sticky, or preferably both. After a good deal of saving up of ingredients, together with some careful bartering, it was possible to make a cake. As there was no flour, crushed biscuits were used, and dried prunes were used as fruit. The whole was topped with icing made of Klim and tasted quite wonderful.

Klim tins were very useful; one ingenious soul actually made a clock out of them! It was driven by a weight, which was a Klim tin filled with water, and each tooth of each wheel had been cut by hand. The clock, mechanism and all, was made entirely out of wire, tin, and string.

When it was completed the very proud constructor insisted on showing it to everyone until it became a bit of a bore. Several of us gravely marched into his room just before the hour and said we had come to hear the clock strike. He was rather crestfallen, and had to admit that it did not strike. We told him that a clock that did not strike was absolutely useless—anyone could make an *ordinary* clock. We had thought there was something *special* about it. That day he started working on a striking version and was still hard at it when the war finished!

It was interesting to observe the way in which different people adapted themselves to their environment. Some would be obviously hating every moment of their captivity. They could never settle down, never read a book; just paced ceaselessly up and down, or perhaps planned some fantastic escape which would never work. It was very unsettling to be in the company of these restless ones.

Another type would apparently relish the opportunity of

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

catching up on his education, and would spend every waking moment poring over books. People would get crazes; they might suddenly decide to take up pig-farming, study books on the subject, and talk and think of nothing but that wonderful pig-farm which would make their fortunes after the war. Then the pig-farmer-to-be would meet someone who knew all about it, cold water would be poured on his ideas, all his plans would be jettisoned, and he would cheerfully decide to become a veterinary surgeon. This would keep him quiet for weeks until the next craze.

The bridge players and the poker players were the least unsettled. They carried on marathon games for days at a time, and seemed quite oblivious of their surroundings.

There was a group of spiritualists who had the most impressive séances. They were very unpopular indeed in their hut and their neighbours made every effort to put an end to these activities.

Many people were studying philosophy and religion. For years I had tried to avoid church parades—usually unsuccessfully—on the grounds that I was a Buddhist. I even had 'Buddhist' on my identity tags. Now I discovered to my surprise that much of my faith, such as it was, actually coincided with Buddhist teaching. One man, a deep-thinking university graduate, shot down in the early stages of the war, had spent years studying religions for purposes of comparison. I was surprised to learn from him that seventy-five per cent of the world's population believes implicitly in reincarnation.

The camp was a breeding ground for so much rumour and gossip that by comparison a country village seemed like a Trappist monastery. Every day the most incredible rumours would be circulated by the most badly informed and nastiest-minded 'grape-vine' that can ever have existed since time began. There were some Russian prisoners in one section of the camp and, according to rumour, they were treated incredibly badly. Certainly some of the senior officers amongst them were forced

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

by the Germans to clean out our latrines, a filthy job if there ever was one.

The Germans were usually referred to as goons, until one day one of them discovered exactly what a goon was. He found a picture of one, and was by no means flattered. The Camp Commandant was informed, and shown one of the American comic strip cartoons containing the horrid figure. The edict went forth that anyone referring to a German as a goon would be severely punished.

A few days later one R.A.F. officer incautiously referred to a guard as a goon, rather too loudly, and was hauled off before the Commandant. After a bit of quick thinking, the officer explained that, far from being a derogatory term, G.O.O.N. was a recognised abbreviation for German Officer or N.C.O.—he got away with it, deservedly so, we thought.

There was the usual mass of barbed wire enclosing the camp, with high wooden watch towers at frequent intervals, manned by guards with machine-guns. About four feet inside the wire was a single strand. Anyone getting beyond this was shot at, and the guards shot to kill.

Each room was equipped with cups and plates made of used tins from food parcels. They were often very well made, and the edges were all carefully stiffened by being rolled over wire. The wire, in some mysterious way, had been magically spirited from the enclosure.

Two squadron leaders, one of whom had been a prisoner for several years, the other a recent arrival, shared a room together. They discovered they were both married to the same girl. The next morning, exercising in the compound, the newcomer solved the problem by touching the wire and being instantly shot dead.

In an effort doubtless intended to liven up the surroundings, some simply fantastic headgear made its appearance. Highly coloured affairs of all shapes, colours, and sizes were sported, but the most startling effect was achieved by those who com-

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

bined what one can only describe as their millinery with carefully cultivated whiskers. There were large black beards, bifurcated red ones, long wispy flaxen ones, exaggerated mutton-chop whiskers, and one gentleman who looked like nothing so much as an explosion in a mattress factory.

Many shaved their heads. It was thought that it would stimulate growth, which it never did, but it was worth doing because it saved the trouble of keeping the hair free from 'mechanised dandruff'—our name for head lice.

It was a most stimulating sight to see a squad of Kriegies on the morning roll-call parade. There was always a number of very 'regimental' types who somehow managed to appear absolutely immaculate, brown kid gloves and all, and who gazed with a disapproving eye at the raggle-taggle collection of hirsute oddities who lounged nonchalantly in very crooked lines. I can even remember seeing a figure on parade in pyjamas, carrying a cup of cocoa and reading a book!

Someone discovered pieces of broken glass in both of the small slices of his daily bread ration. Everyone carefully inspected their own slices, and several more pieces were found. A complaint was put in, and it was discovered that the German baker had recently lost some relatives in the bombing at Hamburg, so by way of retaliation he had put a few pieces of broken glass through the mincer, and used it liberally in his bread-making. He refused to say how long he'd been doing it, but promised to stop forthwith, and no one seemed any the worse, though we were always a bit worried after this when anything we were eating crunched.

At one period we had no Red Cross parcels at all, and all the cats in the camp vanished, never to return. We ate them. Unfortunately we had no fuel either and so they had to be eaten raw, but there is very little that you cannot eat if you are hungry enough. One officer remarked that when the folks back home asked him how he had been treated, he would now be able to tell them that he had had a taste of the cat!

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Each wooden hut was divided into small rooms, and each room housed eight occupants. After they had been together for a few months men used to get on each other's nerves, and when they could stand each other no longer they would move to other rooms. Each man seemed to have a repertoire of about three stories, which he told over and over again until told kindly, or unkindly, to shut up or get out.

Some had strange stories to tell of how they were taken prisoner. Two had fallen out of their aircraft without parachutes and lived. One of these had landed in a pinewood and had slid unharmed between two trees; he had a document confirming it from a German officer who witnessed the incident. The other had not been so lucky, landing in deep snow and shattering both legs, but at least he was alive.

The most unusual story was that of a young American. His story was that he had been learning to fly in Florida, and during a solo training flight over the sea had been shot down by machine-gun fire from a submarine. They had fished him out of the water, and he was taken back to Germany as a prisoner.

A popular method of passing the time was by holding debates. Once we had a debate on a vital aspect of Woman. The subject of the debate was "That this house considers that the advantage of the pneumatic qualities of the fat ones exceeds the advantage of the agility of the skinny ones."

We divided ourselves up into 'combines' for messing purposes, and some of the combines would make 'Kriegie Brew'. This extremely potent fluid was double distilled from carefully hoarded prunes, raisins and sugar. On New Year's Eve we were shut up in the huts at dusk as usual with guards and dogs patrolling. Just before midnight we were horrified to see the swaying figure of an exceedingly inebriated prisoner approach the foot of one of the watch towers by the wire. Searchlights were turned on him, and at any moment we expected to hear the machine-guns open up. He shouted up to the box:

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes, a leetle."

"Well then, f—— you!"

Turning, he ran like mad to the hut, hopped back in through the open window and all was quiet again.

It was a favourite joke in the camp to say, "Home before Christmas or homo before Easter," but there was really only a very small amount of overt homosexuality. As always, the homosexuals took it for granted that I was one of their number, and formed their own 'combines' in some cases. I was asked to play a female part in the camp theatre, but I refused without hesitation. I was still clinging to my masculinity. It had been quite different for the school play, where I had been virtually ordered to put on skirts. Here it would have been a public admission. I should also have had to grow my hair for the part and this I was certainly not prepared to do.

One day, while tramping round the compound in the thick dust for exercise, I was approached by a tall, very handsome man. He really was strikingly good-looking, and he asked me if I minded if he walked round with me. As we talked he took my arm. I resisted this at once, then apologised and explained that I had a 'thing' about such contacts. He expressed some surprise, as he had been absolutely convinced that I was a homosexual. He freely admitted that he was one himself, although married to a very beautiful girl, an American model, and they had a child. He had been a prisoner for over four years, and had escaped several times, once almost reaching the Swiss frontier before being recaptured.

We became very great friends, though always absolutely platonic. He came into my hut, and joined my combine. We would spend long, happy hours discussing every subject under the sun together, had a very great deal in common and were absolutely *en rapport*.

Then one day, without preamble, he announced that on April 18th he was going to die. Naturally I was quite worried

#### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

about this as he was not the sort of person to joke about such a serious thing. He was absolutely convinced that on this exact date he would pass on. It was not that he particularly wanted to die, just that he was certain he would.

It was a long while before I went to sleep on the night of the 17th, and I woke very early next morning. The shutters were open, and across the room I could see him, lying in his top bunk on a thin straw palliasse, with his one threadbare blanket over him. He seemed to be breathing, though, and I thought that I had really been very stupid to worry about him. The other occupants of the room woke up and gazed enquiringly at me. I gave them the thumbs up sign and they seemed relieved. The figure in the top bunk still lay peacefully, then suddenly sat up. For a moment it was impossible to realise what had happened. He was not dead, but he might just as well have been. His soul had left his body, but the body still lived. He was raving mad. Paranoia.

For some time we had heard the sound of bombing in the distance. About the middle of April we heard the distinctive rumble of artillery added to it. The Germans became more and more worried, and we became more and more cheerful. Finally came the day, May the 5th, when the goons withdrew, and the Russians arrived.

With loud whoops of joyous anticipation we descended upon the Red Cross store and broke it open. Now at last we could have that gargantuan meal that we had all looked forward to for so long. Back in the hut we opened two food parcels and planned a menu. Obviously we should have to start with soup, and we each sat down before one of our home-made tin plates full of hot soup. Not one of us could get more than halfway through it! We were so unused to food that our stomachs just wouldn't hold any more, and we couldn't eat another thing. Two Kriegies, who decided to stuff themselves anyway, died that night.

The Russians brought us some fresh meat, so fresh in fact

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

that it walked in, saying 'Moo'. One of the R.A.F. officers was a government meat inspector in civilian life, being a qualified veterinary surgeon and sanitary inspector.

The slaughtering was carried out by an American ex-cowboy, the meat was cut up, inspected by the expert, who declared it quite unfit for human consumption, then it was cooked and eaten. It tasted wonderful, although it could have done with a little more cooking. The cowboy said, with his mouth full, that he'd known meat hurt worse than that get better.

An R.A.F. officer said, "This is the first time for four years that I can honestly say I have eaten better than my dog at home."

The Russians were a mixed crowd. The officers were very pleasant and easy to get on with, but some of the private soldiers were horrible creatures. They had dull, slab-like faces with Mongolian eyes, and one or two looked as though they were fugitives from the zoo.

There were a lot of very young non-commissioned officers. They appeared to be about sixteen years of age, but were probably nearer twenty. They had smart uniforms, with epaulettes and cords. They each carried an enormous revolver, and more than once I saw a young N.C.O. brandish his gun at one of the more recalcitrant of his squad.

I only saw one Russian atrocity, but it was a terrible one indeed. An officer was actually driving about in a German car, a front-wheel-drive Adler, which was minus the back wheels. . . .

Not far away from our camp was an airfield, and one glorious day, after a week of anxious waiting, we saw a formation of B17s orbiting the landing ground. We knew that before many hours had elapsed we should be home again.

So back to England by Flying Fortress. I promptly had three baths, one after the other. I had scabies and had lost three and a half stone in weight.

## CHAPTER FIVE

AS A FIGHTER PILOT, I had never seriously considered what I should do after the war. Now I found myself demobilised and faced with earning a living.

I met a man who seemed to have all the qualities of an ideal business partner. He was a little older and a lot wiser than I was. He was also extremely clever and had a highly developed sense of humour.

It was our intention to set up a small automobile engineering business, specialising in experimental and prototype work. We had only a very small amount of capital between us, and we found it impossible to get suitable premises. The decision was made to build our own. On a plot of land we pulled up all the trees with a tractor, and built our own little factory; with the aid of one labourer, and in spite of every conceivable obstacle being put in our path. Ministries, neighbours, town planning, everyone seemed to be conspiring to stop us.

My partner and a labourer did most of the building between them; I helped as much as I could, but it was not very much. I did, however, manage to get some manufacturing orders. Everything that *could* possibly go wrong went wrong. I had a severe attack of jaundice with a haemorrhage and was working away looking like a Chinaman with pickled onions for eyeballs when my partner developed polio. His wife, who had been a nurse, did a wonderful job in looking after him, and he made an almost complete recovery in a very short time. There was very little residual paralysis.

Incredibly enough we managed to get the business going on

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

quite a sound paying basis, but the premises became too small, so we split up and I started a separate concern. I also managed to buy a rather horrible house in Camberley, with the aid of a first and second mortgage; I covered the outside with cement paint, and then sold it for a substantial profit.

Control of a small company was acquired, and I also managed to repeat my trick of buying an ugly, unattractive house cheaply in Englefield Green, and selling the same house in the spring, which had now become a lot more charming and a lot more expensive.

In the prison camp I had commenced work on the design of a racing car for Grand Prix. The Ministry of Supply gave us a permit to build a team of four cars, and I arranged with some big manufacturers to help by supplying components and technical assistance. I received no financial aid.

The B.R.M. was then being conceived, and my intention was to produce a rival car which I believed would be superior. The engine was laid out as a three-stage supercharged flat twelve-cylinder engine, with Aspin rotary valves. The chassis was of very advanced design.

In 1946 motor-racing had started again, and I took part in every possible event, driving a variety of cars, including Alta, E.R.A., Maserati, Lagonda and Delahaye.

My main business was moved to Egham, Surrey. A few weeks afterwards I went into a local hairdresser's shop. The shop was fairly well filled with a representative selection of the male local inhabitants, so I sat down to await my turn. Suddenly the proprietor spotted me. "Good heavens," he said—in what seemed to me to be a very loud voice indeed—"If it isn't Flight Lieutenant Cowell! Last time I saw you there was a warrant out for your arrest."

Every head in the shop turned to inspect me. I hastily explained that the warrant for my arrest had been due to someone else having a misunderstanding with a landlord and that the charges had quickly been dropped. The hairdresser

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

had been in the R.A.F. at the time when I was on rest, and he had worked in the officers' mess.

He certainly did not do my reputation much good, and for weeks afterwards mothers would clutch their children to them as I passed and rumours of a dangerous criminal being in the town spread like wildfire.

A few weeks later I went into the shop again, and was told I had just missed seeing the great Nijinsky having his hair cut. Although I had never been to the ballet in my life, and knew nothing whatever about it, I had read Nijinsky's biography, written by his devoted wife. Later I met them both, at Great Fosters, a local historic house turned hotel. Mr. Bentley, the manager, introduced us. Nijinsky was an old and tired man but was amused by my few words of Russian and Polish, picked up during the war. His wife was a most remarkable person—meeting her made a great impression on me.

We were having tea at Great Fosters, sitting in the lovely gardens, when I observed that an elderly gentleman at the next table bore a most remarkable resemblance to C. Aubrey Smith, the film star. He wore a cricket blazer and had the most enormous eyebrows. It turned out that he was C. Aubrey Smith in person, looking just like a caricature of himself. Bette Davis and David Niven were amongst other stars we saw there.

A favourite pub was The George at Dorchester, near Oxford. The proprietor was the late 'Curly' Dryden, ex-R.A.F. Squadron Leader, a racing motorist and a great friend.

Calling at The George one day I sent my companions in to have a quick lunch while I stayed outside to do some adjustments to the car—an experimental rotary-valved model. They soon emerged after a quick lunch, and had a special sandwich, wrapped in paper, for me to eat on the journey.

We drove off, and the sandwich was unwrapped and passed to me to eat while driving. I took it without taking my eyes from the road, and was just going to take a large bite when it

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

suddenly struck me that the thing seemed rather thick. I stopped the car and had a look at it. The sandwich consisted of two slices of bread; in between them was spreadeagled a dead mole, with its little pink feet sticking out between the slices!

Motor-racing took up a great deal of my time; I took it very seriously and got together a 'stable'. We raced in England, Ireland, Jersey, and on the Continent. Every event was an adventure in itself and not the least exciting part was often the journey to and from the place where the race was held. We had an epic one-day dash to Switzerland with a large van, and on occasions used to fly, in order to save time.

Before each race we would get telegrams from well-wishers, often of a somewhat cryptic nature, but we were completely stumped by one, addressed to my racing partner. It ran as follows, "You have forgotten your sanitary stopper. Have posted it to you." The telegram as originally telephoned read, "You have forgotten your Saint Christopher." But it had been phoned in by an excited French girl, and so a slight error had crept in.

Assets were gradually amassed, but somehow I was restless and dissatisfied. At the end of a year or two I could look back and see a definite pattern of behaviour. There would be some ambition or other, usually connected with money or power in some form. I would go all out to get it, regardless of anything else. Finally the ambition would be achieved and then I would get some other still more attractive objective to strive after, which in turn would be achieved and then lose its glamour.

My life was pointless and empty. I had immense drive and enthusiasm but it was always directed to making a continuous effort to 'build up a front'.

Afterwards I was made to realise clearly that what was actually happening in this period was an attempt to compensate for the fact that I knew, deep down inside me, that I

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

had a feminine nature. Outwardly I made frantic efforts to show the world at large how masculine and assertive I could be.

Over in Dublin for a few days I motored out to Tulley House, Kildare. After being shown some of the horses of the National Stud I had a look at the garden. I had been told that it was Japanese, laid out by a famous Japanese gardener, who had come to Eire years ago especially for this purpose. The dwarf trees were all four to six hundred years old.

It all seemed rather haphazardly laid out, and not very interesting, and as I turned to leave I met one of the gardeners. He asked me if I had been shown round properly. I replied that I had not, but thought I had seen the main points of interest.

A few minutes later he was showing me the garden, and I was discovering just how much significance and symbolism such a place can possess.

I knew that Japanese flower arrangements could have some hidden meaning, but a complete garden. . . ?

The whole lay-out and setting was designed to tell the story of a man's life, from before birth to after death. We started at the Gate of Oblivion and saw the cave representing the womb. Then along the narrow path of Life. One or two ways turned off the main one to represent Temptation. Then through the dark tunnel of Ignorance we passed into light.

So far all up to this point had been in shadow; now came the schooldays, climbing up from Ignorance to Knowledge, with little stone beacons of the spirit to light the way. Up and up until the world was spread out in front of us.

There were pitfalls, represented by unguarded holes, there was the path of Vigilance, where care was needed, then a descent to the level of the others. The path through Life was rough; there were separate stepping-stones, each different, each representing one year.

Then came a choice of ways. There was an easy, decadent way. There was a narrow single way, or one could cross

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

the Bridge of Expectations to the Isle of Joy and Wonder.

One had the choice of marriage, or the Geisha house, then the path led along the Bridge of Engagement, to the Bridge of Marriage.

The Bridge of Engagement consisted of two halves, reaching out towards each other, whilst the Bridge of Marriage was two bridges combined together. There was a stone table, covered with elaborately arranged flowers to represent the wedding feast. From here on the path was much wider, there was the exquisite Path of Honeymoon, a wishing well, and then there was a parting of the way. Here the couple had their first quarrel and went their separate ways; the path divided into two, with high rocks between representing the difficulties of marriage. The paths rejoined and the couple were together again.

Together they climbed the Hill of Ambition; there were setbacks, represented by ups and downs of the path, and disappointments, as when the wishing well was almost arrived at, at the end of a long path, but was just out of reach across some water.

The climb of Ambition grew steeper, then there was a quarrel and the paths separated again, to rejoin beyond the summit of the hill. Now the Height of Ambition, on top of a hill of solid rock. From there one could see all over the garden. One could look back in retrospect or look forward and see one's life spread out in front.

Then the Turning Point, and downhill to old age, with the light of the spirit still burning in its stone beacon. Past idols and devils, past an easy bridge to the wishing well. Across the bridge of the Span of Life, the couple reached the lovely Garden of Peace and Contentment. There was a stone chair for the old lady, with a path for the old man across the smooth green lawn on stepping-stones, towards the final beacon of the Spirit in the hills beyond, then across under the weeping willows to the Gates of Eternity. . . .

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

And I had thought it was laid out haphazardly!

This lovely garden made a great impression on me. Perhaps I envied the Japanese man his well ordered life, perhaps it brought home to me the fact that my own life lacked purpose and direction.

I was certainly grateful to Mr. Doyle, the gardener, who explained it all to me in his soft Irish voice.

Back again in England I realised that in comparison with other people I was restless and unhappy.

An incident occurred at this time which shook me up rather a lot, and gave me an inkling of the depth of the emotion that can lie below the surface of the conscious mind.

I went to see a film called *Mine Own Executioner*. In this film the hero gets shot down by flak whilst flying a Spitfire. The scene was photographed and directed very realistically. I knew it was done with the aid of a studio mock-up of a Spitfire cockpit, with back-projection of the ground and the flak; but for a moment I was back again in the cockpit, with the familiar mirror above my head, and that bulbous perspex cockpit hood with its ball-ended rubber jettison handle.

As the aircraft was hit and crashed in flames I felt all the pent-up emotion released that I must have experienced when my own plane was shot down; but this time I was an observer, and was not so preoccupied with what I was doing that I could feel no emotion. Now I felt the full impact of stark terror. Fear that I would be burnt alive, fear that I would be lynched by the soldiers, fear that I would be terribly injured by the crash.

It was a full hour before I was able to pull myself together and walk shakily out of the cinema.

It was early in 1948 when I realised that all was far from well with my life. My marriage, which had been an unhappy one, with two children, had broken up—it ended in divorce. It is difficult to say much about this marriage. It is acutely embarrassing now for me even to think about it. It is an

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

episode in my life which is best forgotten. I was not at all well, physically, and it seemed that something was drastically wrong somewhere. I became depressed and lost weight. After giving the matter a great deal of careful thought, I decided to go to a first-class psychiatrist.

My past life, especially the pattern of my behaviour during recent years, had shown that my feelings and emotions were badly tangled up and in need of being straightened out somehow. My life was leading nowhere. My faith in psychotherapy was, however, not very great. I considered it was important to find the right man who would use the right method for my particular trouble.

There are three main ways of treating mental disorders. By psycho-analysis, or some other system involving a series of sessions with a psychiatrist who assists the patient to unearth the real cause of the illness, locked away deep in his unconscious mind. There is the shock treatment method, using either insulin or an electric current. Finally there is the surgical method, involving actual severance of brain tissue.

I was not a lunatic, not even the victim of a nervous breakdown in the usually accepted sense of the term. I was able to carry on exactly as before, and showed no real neurotic symptoms. Some form of analysis was the answer, therefore. Few subjects have aroused more controversy than psychology and I wanted to choose my psychiatrist carefully because I did not think the analysis would proceed very far if I had no confidence in the methods used, or the person using them.

The main schools of thought are those of Freud, Jung, and Adler. Jung does not seem to have brought anything new to the therapy, and rather seems inclined towards the occult. Adler's psychology is dominated by the idea of using the neurosis for personal advantage. Both Jung and Adler base their psychologies on theories which escape from sexuality.

Freud says that man wants most of all to be loved, Jung says

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

that his main urge is to feel secure, Adler says he wants more than anything else to feel significant.

Many people have a nervous breakdown and are amazed when the underlying cause is shown to be founded on something connected with sex. In my case there was no question about it at all. The trouble was obviously a sexual one, so equally obviously a Freudian analyst was the one for me.

The man I went to see was a Freudian and at the top of his profession. He was a brilliant writer, and I had read many of his books; it might have been far better if he had been a complete stranger to me. Such was my confidence in his outstanding ability, however, that I was certain that he was the best choice I could make.

He was a little older than I had expected. His attitude was extremely impersonal, and I noticed all the little touches of Freudian technique; no hand-shaking, effacement of his personality, sitting where I could not see his face.

He was not at all surprised that I had no real manifestations or symptoms of nervous illness. Admittedly there was a certain amount of actual conflict going on, but the real conflict was due to the dynamic energy of primary urges with their inhibiting elements which were denied expression. It was a struggle between instinct and ego.

Lying on my back on a couch, with the doctor seated somewhere behind me, I had to say the first thing that came into my head. For the first few sessions, which lasted an hour each, only matters of immediate importance were mentioned. Then gradually by a process of association, thoughts of the past came out. To start with I was rather distracted by the sound of the doctor's pen writing in his notebook, but soon I got used to this. At least I knew he was not asleep.

It seemed as though thoughts were being pushed into my head by underlying thoughts. I soon managed to get hold of the associated thought, and realised that often the deep-lying urges of the mind push the first thought forward into con-

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

sciousness in the hope that the second one will never emerge to the level of consciousness at all.

Thanks to the technique used I soon lost my shyness, and produced a mass of material. Episodes which I had completely forgotten emerged. Happy events would make me feel happy when I remembered them; unhappy events, and there were many of them, came out with a great deal of resistance and made me very miserable and depressed.

Dreams are known as 'the royal road to the unconscious' but, I thought I never dreamed. It was explained that I had dreams all right, but I did not remember them after waking. I tried writing down my first waking thought, and from that recollecting the preceding dream, and after a good deal of practice, aided by hot lobster and cheese sauce for late supper, I managed to recapture the elusive dreams, from which so much could be learned about the contents of my unconscious mind.

Very few of the dreams were naïve and easy to interpret, most of them had to be divided into different scenes and parts. Then I would free-associate on each part, and the elements could be reassembled and the real meaning of the dream would emerge. Often the manifest content of the dream would prove to be misleading, and underlying hidden meaning concealed.

By the time I had had about thirty hours of analysis I began to feel that here lay the answer. It was going to be a very long time indeed before the analysis was completed, probably a year or more even if I went several times a week. It did, however, seem worth while, and although the going was often hard I realised that progress was being made.

The expense was considerable, but it was a small price to pay for the chance of becoming a happy and properly adjusted person. It was usual for the receptionist to hand me the account at the end of each ten sessions, and it was my habit to write out a cheque on the spot.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

When the third of these accounts was due the doctor gave it to me himself. He said, "I expect you will find it more convenient to pay in cash. You know how it is these days." As he uttered these words he was suddenly no longer the brilliant medical scientist whom I looked up to and respected. My respect for him vanished as though it had never been, and I walked home alone with my illusions shattered.

Weeks passed. I realised that what had occurred had a much deeper significance than appeared on the surface, and was part of the transference situation. This occurs during an analysis when patients behave towards the doctor as though he were someone that they have loved or hated in the past. Whatever had caused it, the fact remained that my idol had shown his feet of clay and anyone else I might go to would be likely to be wanting in technique in comparison with the master.

One man I did meet whom I felt could help me, but he was off to America in a week's time. He recommended two men as possibilities. The first of these I tried unsuccessfully. The atmosphere and attitude was all wrong, and got worse. The second was a Scot. Very clever, with immense patience and understanding. He was just the man.

The Scot was not such an ardent Freudian as my original analyst had been, and he started me off with a lot of tests. These included giving me a series of words and asking what I associated with each. The time taken to reply in each case was measured. I was also shown ink blots and had to write down what the shapes suggested to me.

Freud has stated that the three most terrible shocks to man's personal esteem were Galileo's revelation that the earth moves round the sun, Darwin's discovery of evolution, and the discovery and demonstration of the animal nature of the unconscious mind.

The biggest shock my personal esteem got was when I discovered that my unconscious mind was predominantly female. Not only was it clearly shown by the tests, and the

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

evidence was far too obvious to be denied, but as the analysis proceeded it became quite obvious that the feminine side of my nature, which all my life I had known of and severely repressed, was very much more fundamental and deep-rooted than I had supposed.

I had confidently expected that the result of the analysis would be a discovery of the fact that I had an unconscious fear of losing my masculinity. I expected to find traces of the Oedipus complex and signs of repressed conflict between animal instincts and moral upbringing. I did not expect to find that, freed of repressions, I was psychologically a woman!

At the conclusion of the analysis I was very far indeed from being a happy and well-adjusted person. Buried memories had been unearthed which had released emotions of fear and hostility, but the peace and well-being of my mind had not been increased.

I have never been a neurotic person in the normally accepted sense of the term, and the treatment had been more in the nature of a character analysis than the usual scientific removal of psycho-neurosis.

Had there been any congenital predisposition towards neurosis I am sure I should have become insane. I would have welcomed insanity; at least it would have been an escape from reality.

The facts had to be faced, and a decision had to be made. I could continue with life, in the certain knowledge that I was likely to continue to be desperately unhappy, or I could put an end to it all.

I did believe that I had a soul, a tiny share of the life force, that agglomeration of vital energy that we, for want of a better term, call God. I believed that when I died that drop of life force would go back into the bucket of the Universal Soul.

One of the basic principles of nature is to create much more than is needed for her primary purpose. According to Ouspensky one of the chief signs of racial degeneration is a

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

weakening of the distinguishing marks of the male and female. In my own case my secondary sex-characteristics were poorly developed, and I had some female characteristics. It seemed to me that here was a strong moral argument for putting an end to my life.

The only argument in favour of continuing my existence seemed to be that as time went on I might become better adapted to life, and might become a useful member of the community. There was also the possibility that my intense death-wish was due to some residual psychological trouble which might resolve itself in time.

I decided that I would leave it for a year, during which time I would do everything possible to make a go of things. If at the end of twelve months I still felt the same, then I considered I should be justified in taking my own life.

I was miserably unhappy, and tried everything I could think of to pull myself round. I tried alcohol, but my troubles were far too deep-rooted to be affected by drink. I tried benzedrine and amphetamine, but they acted as depressants. I tried being with people, and being alone. It was much better to be alone, because at least one did not spread depression and gloom.

Sometimes I would meet a happy and contented person and feel a little glow of reflected pleasure from the contact. I was immensely grateful to such people for being as they were. It was rather satisfying and relaxing to sit by the side of a river and watch the water as it flowed, and I would often do this. The only other occupation which gave me pleasure was music. I never went to concerts, because the emotions which the music aroused were almost too great to bear, but I loved the piano.

Hour after hour I would play Beethoven, Handel, Chopin, Bach. It was a wonderful relief and escape to lose myself in a sea of harmony. Months went by, still without the slightest sign of any change in my feelings.

From habit acquired during my analysis, I still found it easy to remember my dreams. I suddenly realised one day that I

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Now I dream in colour. Before, everything used to be a dull monotone, but now—Technicolor!

It was during this period that Lisa came into my life. We met when we were both staying in London at the same hotel. Right from our very first meeting we became firm friends. There was a strong, though rather strange, affinity between us. We spent every possible moment in each other's company.

I had been playing squash in the R.A.C. with a Wing Commander friend. As we changed after the match he observed, "You know, you really ought to wear a brassière." These words, meant as a joke, made me decide to try and find out just how feminine I really was, physically. It was also the last time I used a communal men's changing-room.

A few days later I was in the Harley Street consulting-room of a famous sexologist. He was kind and very understanding. After hearing my story he proceeded with a thorough physical examination. Then I learned something about myself which made a great deal of difference to my acceptance of things.

He gave it as his considered opinion that my body showed quite prominent feminine sex characteristics: wide hips and narrow shoulders, female type of pelvis, hair distribution and skin; small hands and feet, no laryngeal relief (Adam's apple), lower limbs tending to converge towards the knees, and other female traits.

My breast formation was examined and described as typically feminine though very little developed. When told that it had been developing recently he said it was due to an alteration in gland balance, perhaps in gland structure. This could have been set off by a series of emotional upsets. There seemed to be some degree of hermaphroditism present, though he could not tell how extensive it was without more detailed examination and laboratory tests. There was a possibility that I had some feminine organs inside my body.

He explained how after the human animal has first been conceived in the womb, until the seventh week it is bisexual,

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

and rudimentary organs of both male and female type are present. Then, in the normal course of events, either a masculinising or a feminising impulse takes over and a boy or a girl develops. In the body of every male, there are, therefore, vestiges of the female, and in every female vestiges of the male.

Sometimes, though rarely, and for reasons that are not yet fully understood, something goes wrong, and a boy or girl may be born with a vital portion of his or her sexual anatomy incomplete or even missing entirely.

Sometimes, owing to faulty development, a child who is to all outward appearance a normal female may prove at puberty to be a male, and an equally male child may develop into a female.

In my own case it seemed that some feminising factor had been at work. I found that this knowledge raised my morale very considerably. The intense shame I had felt began to disappear. Once I realised that my femininity had a substantial *physical* basis I did not despise myself so much. True, I now knew I was physically abnormal, but at least I could accept, a degree of femininity without losing self-respect.

The problem now was how best to reorientate my existence in such a way that I could integrate my personality and express the previously deeply repressed femininity without loss of self-respect and without becoming a social outcast.

The cumulative effects of the shock of the psycho-analysis and now the discovery I was physically abnormal had affected my personality to a very considerable extent.

One thing was certain; I had not the slightest desire to swell the ranks of the gentlemen of no particular gender. It is true that I had become a little more tolerant in this direction, and had I met one I would have refrained from actually kicking his spine up through the top of his head, but only with an effort.

It was most desirable that I should allow some of my innate femininity to express itself, but I had not the slightest desire to become effeminate, which was an entirely different thing.

It was my intention to continue with motor engineering, and

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

perhaps even do a certain amount of racing, but the tremendous enthusiasm was now a thing of the past. I took over control of a small company which was formed to design and manufacture clothes, theatrical and *haute couture*. There was a small staff, headed by a very experienced and celebrated woman designer, who was also a director. We produced a small collection, and obtained some orders.

Despite my own sartorial inelegance, I knew more than a little about line and colour. Aesthetics are not so far removed from engineering as one might think. Although I was not able to spend much time with this business I had several designs produced, and I learned a vast amount. My position was that of managing director.

It seemed obvious that it would be a very great handicap to have little or no knowledge of the practical side of dressmaking, but as it turned out I soon learned all I needed to know about cutting and making. Now and again, in my ignorance, I would make a mistake of the type referred to by the R.A.F. as a 'monumental clanger', which would send the workroom staff into fits of mirth.

One of the worst of these was over raglan sleeves. I suggested that we got in a few yards of raglan in case we wanted to make some! (A raglan sleeve is, of course, a *style* of sleeve.)

Gradually I learned about gilets, peplums, darts, toile, petersham, plackets and a vast number of other esoteric technical terms. The work was pleasant, but the customers were often exasperating and I stayed out of sight as much as possible, making few personal contacts.

Doing this type of work was, to me, a public admission that there was a feminine side to my nature, and now I lived in a district where there was a preponderance of artistic people. This was only a passing phase for me, and I never really fitted in to this type of society, although I had many friends amongst them.

Lisa was now working in London, and I told her everything

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

there was to be told about myself. She was remarkably understanding, and we saw as much of each other as our respective business commitments allowed.

There were, of course, a lot of effeminate men and mannish women in our world. I rather liked most of the women, but could never get over an instinctive dislike of the 'pansies'.

A dance was in progress in one of the artists' clubs. One graceful creature with shoulders like a hock bottle, was dancing with a girl when she stumbled and fell heavily. He made no effort of any sort to help her to her feet, but continued to dance by himself. "The show must go on," he explained.

Several of us were sitting in the bar of a well-known public house when a heavily-moustached figure entered, with friend. He scrutinised the faces of the company, then turned to his companion and said, "Where are all the queer people we've come to see?"

Although it was still very difficult for me to discuss my case with strangers, and it meant overcoming an enormous resistance, I was determined to discover as much as possible about my body, and to try to solve the mystery of my femininity.

An appointment was made for me to see one of the leading authorities on intersexuality, author of many books on the subject. Reading one of his works, I came across a reference to 'loathsome feminised boys'. This use of the word *loathsome* put me off him completely. I went straight to the telephone and cancelled my appointment. To my way of thinking, a medical scientist should completely repress his own personal feelings and regard his cases with scientific detachment.

My case was taken over by a brilliant woman doctor, a specialist in glands. I was examined by two gynaecologists, a professor of anatomy, two general practitioners, and another endocrinologist. There were many examinations and tests, and it was decided that my case was a very unusual one indeed, apparently unique of its type, certainly as far as British medical history went.

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

The point that seemed to surprise the experts was not so much that I was so feminine, but, oddly enough, the fact that I was so masculine. They thought that at some time previously, probably about ten years before, some considerable change had begun.

There was a case, regarded as unique, in the First World War, when a Frenchman, Raoul Hurpin, was buried alive in a trench which had been demolished by a shell. He was in hospital for three years with shell-shock. He recovered, but the experiences he had been through worked a transformation in him and he became a woman.

When a young soldier, he had had many affairs and was regarded as something of a Don Juan. He had met a girl named Emily Hoskins, who was then aged twenty. She wished to establish the paternity of her son, who wanted to take up a government post in the provinces on completion of his military service, and she started the French equivalent of a breach of promise action against Raoul Hurpin.

She and her lawyers had a shock when they learned that the alleged father was a woman. The defendant admitted responsibility, but pleaded that, being now a woman, it was hardly possible to marry the plaintiff. Medical testimony was given, and Hurpin was declared the father of the child.

Proceedings were taken to secure official recognition of the change of sex, and finally Hurpin married a workman.

My own case had certain features in common with this one, but there was one very important difference indeed. Modern medical science has made great strides since the case of Raoul Hurpin, and my doctors had hormone therapy, sexual plastic surgery, and surgical endocrinotherapy at their disposal. This meant that there was no longer any need to stand by helplessly whilst nature took its course. Development could be arrested or encouraged. The fundamental principal of legislation with regard to intersexes was laid down by the Roman jurist Ulpianus; the prevailing sex should be accepted socially and

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY.

legally. If it cannot be determined, then the pragmatic sex has to be accepted. Once this is established, then the problem is to help the intersex to conform both physically and psychologically to that sex.

The position was this: I could choose whether to spend the rest of my life as a man, as a woman, or leave things as they were, in which case I should probably have become more feminine as I got older, though this was by no means certain.

By now I had accepted the fact that nature had originally intended me to be female, but for the purpose of some grim joke I had been supplied with male organs. Although I was tremendously upset and embarrassed when I realised this, it explained a great deal about my nature and character that had always been a puzzle. It explained why I had felt such a strong desire to compensate by being as aggressively masculine as possible, it explained why I had always felt more at home with women than with men, and why I had an instinctive dislike of the male body.

Male hormones and some plastic surgery on my chest could have removed any physical ambiguity as regards my sex, but I felt this would only turn me into a virilised woman. On the other hand, if I were to go the other way and become more feminine, a vast number of problems arose.

None of the doctors had any knowledge or experience of a change from adult male to female, although the reverse was not uncommon.

Obviously I should have to become very much more feminised before I could possibly live as a female. I had no desire to become ostracised as a freak.

The only thing to do was to take a chance as to the outcome and get on with the treatment. This would probably take an indefinite time, probably several years at least.

Another problem was the social one. Quite obviously the matter had to be kept quite secret, and this would need a great deal of careful planning, neighbours and human nature being

### ROBERTA GOWELL'S STORY

what they are. The financial problem, too, demanded careful thought. As I was expecting one day to change over from trousers to skirts it would be necessary to start up again in a different environment when the change-over took place, and I had to allow for an indefinite period in which I would probably be incapacitated.

It was certainly going to need a fair amount of personal drive to go through with the metamorphosis, and I had to face the fact that as I became more feminised I might lose my initiative and cease treatment; also I was going to need a great deal of money to go through with things and must guard against the possibility of funds running short. The National Health Scheme could hardly be used in a case like mine, especially as most of the specialists involved did not practise within the Scheme.

The biggest risk I was taking appeared to be that when it was all over I might not be socially acceptable as a woman, that I might become an invalid, that the strain of having such a secret might be too great, assuming it was possible to keep it at all. Obviously there would be considerable psychological problems to contend with; there would also be the strain of waiting to see exactly what was going to happen.

Fortunately, during the war I had developed a very successful technique for not worrying about things. I just took it for granted that almost certainly the very worst would happen, then on the rare occasions that it did not I was not surprised!

Anyway, there was a definite possibility that in this case things might turn out as hoped, and although I hated the thought of possible operations, it would be very interesting to see how my mind and body were influenced by the changes. It would also be interesting to see whether, when and if I became a woman, I should then be attracted to men or other women, or whether perhaps my instincts would be dormant.

### **ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY**

There seemed to be nothing to lose and a great deal to gain, both in future happiness and in scientific knowledge. Here was an opportunity for me to tread a path as yet untrod.

So off I went on the great adventure.

## CHAPTER SIX

THE WOMAN DOCTOR who was in charge of my case was an exceptionally brilliant and clever person. She was an endocrinologist—gland specialist—and was certainly a wonderful example herself of the efficacy of hormone treatment and proper dieting.

Her skin was clear and unlined, and her general appearance and manner was that of a woman of about thirty. In actual fact she was well over fifty!

When she began to treat me I received a shock. The shock occurred when I discovered just how expensive hormones are. The initial treatment was intended to implement the natural flow of female hormones in my body. The fact that I already had an abnormal supply of female hormones had been shown by biological tests, and also by the fact that I had many female secondary characteristics in my body.

The extra supply of hormones was expected to stimulate development and counteract the effect of male hormones, which I seemed to be producing from the adrenals. The glandular balance of the body is a very delicate and complicated matter indeed, so my treatment had to be supervised most carefully. A very close watch was kept for any sign of unpleasant symptoms which could easily develop if the glands were affected in the wrong way.

The first externally noticeable effect, which occurred after a few weeks, was very striking. I suddenly discovered that, almost overnight, I had acquired a very good complexion. Previously the texture of my skin had resembled that of an old, rather

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

weather-beaten orange. Now it was very much improved indeed, remarkably so. It appeared almost like that of a child.

This was obviously going to be the first problem. However, I soon discovered that it only showed the peaches and cream effect when very thoroughly cleaned; an hour or so after washing the effect was not nearly so marked, and fortunately it was rarely noticed.

From early adolescence I had always looked older than I really was. When a podgy twelve, people often took me for sixteen, and at seventeen I could pass for at least twenty-one. Far from finding this disturbing I did my best to foster the appearance of senility, and at the age of twenty-five had been taken for over thirty-five on more than one occasion.

Now, however, I began to shed the years, although not aware of it at the time. The fact of my rejuvenation was brought to my notice one day in a London club.

A man whom I used to know quite well, but had not seen for twelve months, came in with his wife, and sat down opposite me, some distance away. I greeted him, but he either failed to notice or did not remember me. He looked in my direction several times, and it seemed that he and his wife were discussing me. At length he came across to me and asked rather diffidently if I were my younger brother!

"No, of course not," I replied, "you know me, surely."

"Good heavens," he said, "it is you. What has happened? You look at least ten years younger."

He seemed completely taken aback. His wife came over and at first refused to accept that I was the same person she had met a year before. She, too, was quite amazed at the change.

It was noticeable that those who saw me regularly noticed nothing, change being perceptible to observant people who saw me only at intervals.

Even in the case of such major disorders as acromegaly and myxoedema, when the facial aspect is greatly affected by gland disorders, the unfortunate patient is often unaware of the

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

considerable changes which may take place in his appearance, which can be dramatically shown by photographs taken at intervals of several months.

Greatly cheered by the fact that rejuvenation seemed to be taking place, I next discovered that I was becoming very much less muscular. This was especially apparent in my forearms and wrists, which used always to be very strong. I had been able to hold out a service rifle in either hand, at arm's length and parallel to the ground, without letting it drop, each rifle being held by the muzzle, just behind the foresight.

Now my wrists and arms became noticeably slender, to such an extent that several people noticed and remarked on it. From then on I had always to keep my coat on in public, especially as my figure began to develop. It became impossible to wear a single-breasted jacket.

Gradually the hair on my head began to get thicker and stronger, and most of my body hair disappeared entirely. My beard gradually became loosened, but it was nearly two years before it vanished completely. Always fond of carbohydrates and sweet things, I now developed a marked craving for fattening foods and confectionery. When I was a child my much hated nurse had described to me how she had rid herself of a predilection for a certain type of cheese by buying a pound of it and eating the whole lot straight off.

I decided to adopt the same method to rid myself of this constant longing for sweets. Purchasing two pounds of chocolate creams I ate the lot, but unfortunately the last one tasted even better than the first. Not only had the cure failed hopelessly but I had now become a chocolate cream addict! A tremendous struggle had to ensue before I could tear myself from the road to æsthetic ruin.

Although it was not apparent in the mirror, obviously my general appearance and demeanour were slowly changing. Throughout my life I had been occasionally approached by homosexuals, who seemed to assume that I was one of them.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

This had always puzzled me. I can only assume that they sensed somehow my innate femininity. Certainly I was far from being effeminate. Now I began to receive approaches from men.

In the past I would sometimes come across a girl who was obviously interested in me, but now this never happened. Fortunately for me, I discovered that I was not very keen on women anyway, so was not at all worried. I went to see a revival of a film which some years before had attracted me very much, and it was interesting to notice that I was now regarding the women in the picture in a very different manner from that which I previously adopted towards them. I could clearly remember noticing one girl in particular when I first saw the film and thinking how very attractive she was. Now, instead of concentrating on the general effect, I found myself analysing her good and bad points and it was difficult to realise that I had once considered her fascinating.

My life at this time was asexual, and I was just not interested in women, and most certainly not in men. Being in the clothing business, I naturally had to smarten up slightly, but I still hated wearing a new suit, and did not worry about my appearance, as long as it did not attract attention.

Waiting in the foyer of a large London cinema, I heard a woman say to her companion, "You remember I was telling you about pansies? Well, there is one over there." Both gazed fixedly in my direction and I turned to see this interesting sight. There was no one else around and I suddenly realised, to my horror and confusion, that I was the 'pansy' referred to!

In the chemist's shop one day I wanted to buy a pair of rubber gloves. The chemist said, "Sorry, madam, there are only men's sizes left."

When I approached a paper and magazine seller in Sloane Square he said, "What do you want, *Woman's Own*, I suppose?" As a matter of fact I had intended to buy *Vogue*, but I hastily changed my mind and bought *The Aeroplane* instead!

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

'Lisa and I were once leaving a large store when I was accosted by an elderly lady, who told me in no uncertain terms that I ought to be ashamed, going round dressed in trousers and with my hair cropped short!'

Waitresses and shop assistants would occasionally call me 'Miss' or 'Madam'. On the Continent this happened much more frequently, especially in France, perhaps because they seem to be more conscious of sex over there. Certainly they are more outspoken on the subject.

It was necessary to resign myself to the fact that, whether I liked it or not, I was now midway between the two sexes. I could not be completely convincing as a male, but would have been equally unconvincing had I tried to live as a female.

One of the doctors I had to visit from time to time was a young gynaecologist who had a consulting practice in Wimpole Street. He was keenly interested in my condition and helped me in many ways. In return I gave him as much detailed information as I could about my case and its developments. He made many pages of notes, which he intended to write up into a paper.

He took the notes home one evening, with a photograph of me, and started to write up the case. His young wife—he had only been married a month—saw the photograph and asked who it was. The doctor explained that it was a man who was undergoing treatment. "Man, my foot!" exclaimed the wife, and seizing the portrait tore it into shreds.

The treatment did not always go smoothly, and some of the effects were very varied. Some days I would feel an almost incredible sense of well-being, bordering on euphoria, with happiness surging within me, so that I almost quivered with a strange mixture of excitement and pleasure. Another day I might feel absolutely prostrated and so weak that I had to get up and dress in easy stages. I felt it was almost too much of an effort to move about enough to keep my self-winding watch going.

Twice I had very mild attacks of amnesia. On each occasion

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

I was out walking and suddenly realised that I had no recollection at all of the last half mile or so. I must have continued to walk automatically, but for some reason my conscious mind had just stopped working, as though I had been asleep. It was a very unpleasant experience, and I most sincerely hoped it was not going to happen often.

After the two attacks—they happened within a few days of each other—I had no further repetition of the trouble.

In order to establish some questions involving heredity, a good deal of research was carried out into my family background. It transpired that an aunt had been born with a congenital absence of vagina, but otherwise there was no sign of any sort of abnormality at all.

A telephone call from the bank one day announced that they had received one of my cheques which had been unmistakably forged. I went round to see it, and it was perfectly genuine. I had written it myself only a few days before. The manager pointed out that my writing was very different, and on close examination I saw that it had changed a lot. It was now rounder and neater, and had acquired some flourishes.

In view of the tremendous changes in my nature and character, I suppose it was inevitable that they should be reflected in my handwriting. My assertiveness and personal drive was slowly diminishing. I could see a definite change in this side of my nature within a few months. It was particularly noticeable in business, and I began to make arrangements to part with my fashion interests. My engineering interests were already disposed of.

Much as I loved this work it was inevitable that I should have to give it up sometime. I could not stay at it much longer and continue to conceal my physical changes, and there was no possibility of my being able to continue with it in the future, as I intended to change my identity entirely.

I was sitting opposite a couple in a railway carriage. They were obviously interested in me and puzzled by my appearance.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Leaving the carriage at a station, I returned for a moment to retrieve my newspaper, left on the seat. A debate was in progress, the woman insisting I was a female and the man that I was a male.

Children and elderly ladies seemed the most observant, or at least the most outspoken in their remarks. I often heard a child say, "Doesn't that man look like a girl," or, "Look at that girl dressed as a man."

As a general rule I was not particularly embarrassed by this, because it did mean I was gradually getting more feminine.

Previously I had regarded myself as a man, with a very regrettable tendency towards femininity which must be repressed at all costs; now I realised that I was fundamentally a female with a dwindling masculinisation. The question was, to what extent would this virility of mine dwindle?

The next thing that happened was that I developed an ability to blush. This first appeared when a man offered me his seat in the Tube. I really was very embarrassed and turned a rosy red.

People who took me for an effeminate male usually regarded me either as an amusing curiosity or with active hostility. I found, especially as my figure developed, I had to be careful to avoid a tendency to hold my hands away from my body and to move them in a feminine fashion. I could not avoid being feminine, but there was no need to be effeminate.

Gradually I put on more and more weight, and my craving for the wrong sorts of food increased. Obviously something drastic had to be done about it, and I started to diet.

This was the first time I had ever attempted anything which could possibly be classified under the heading of 'beautifying'. For the first time, but not by any means the last, I found myself confronted with a mass of conflicting advice. Expert opinion advised no eating between meals, other equally expert opinion advised plenty of eating between meals, in order to avoid getting extremely hungry. Lots of water, no water. Take

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

exercise (it slims you), take no exercise (it makes you hungry). Eat no butter at all, it is *very* fattening. Some butter is essential, it stops you from getting too hungry and helps you burn up other food. Vegetables and fruit are essential to the slimmer, cut out vegetables and fruit completely, a fluid-free diet is required. Drink milk, never touch milk. Eat no bananas, live on bananas! So it went on.

As my hunger was pathological it was decided to try to reduce it during the diet period with drugs. Benzedrine had no effect at all, so amphetamine was tried. This did reduce hunger a bit, but had a very peculiar effect.

I was driving fast in an open sports car, wearing polaroid glasses, when I observed spots of what seemed to be rain on my glasses. I whipped them off, and discovered that there was no rain. I slowed down and tried the glasses again. It appeared exactly as though spots of rain were falling on them. I borrowed a pair of non-polaroid glasses from my passenger and the strange effect ceased. It was not imagination, but there was no scientific explanation that I could find.

By dint of cutting out obviously fattening things, under careful medical supervision, I managed to streamline my figure to the correct proportions. The distribution of the comparatively modest amount of fat had become very different, and was now typically feminine. My chest and hip measurements were now greatly increased, although my waist was much narrower.

After reading a book on ethics which interested me very much I wrote to the author. The publishers forwarded my letter for me and I received a reply. We exchanged several long letters and he asked me to meet him for lunch.

He was a good deal younger than I had expected, and wore a full beard. His hair was beginning to thin and had receded at the temples. Not bad-looking, he was a very masculine type. He was apparently a misogynist, and appeared to have a low opinion of women.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

After lunch we sat talking over coffee, and he lit his pipe. We were discussing the connection between sex and intelligence, I, of course, maintaining that, given equal opportunities, women can be the mental equal of men. He disagreed violently.

Then came the surprise, a surprise so shattering that the scene will be crystal-clear in my memory for the rest of my life. He sat there, sucking at his pipe and toying with his coffee cup. He was silent for a minute or two, and I was idly wondering how long that beard of his had taken to grow.

Suddenly, "I don't really see why I shouldn't tell you," he said, "but five years ago I was a woman."

Such a possibility had never entered my head for one moment. As I looked at him now it seemed absolutely and utterly fantastic, quite unbelievable, but I was not then fully aware of all that modern medical science could do.

He had been born as a perfectly normal girl, physically at least. Mentally he felt like an interloper in his own body. He hated anything feminine and was a gawky, desperately unhappy child. By no means bad-looking, he became a brilliant scholar, and was also an outstanding athlete. He wore men's clothes whenever possible, and was frequently assumed to be a man.

One day a doctor friend suggested that he might be helped by hormone treatment, and gave him a supply. The results were more than satisfactory, and years later, after intensive therapy and some thirteen operations, he was certified legally a man. His case was by no means unique, and he told me of other cases, all, of course, women changing to men. For some time he had lived on an income of £5 per week, out of which he spent £2 10s. per week on hormones.

Although the final result was so satisfactory, he had endured immense hardships, and had to have constant medical supervision. He still suffered intermittently from hypoglycæmia, which is caused by a deficiency of sugar in the blood.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Immensely strong, even for a man, I found it impossible to imagine him as a girl. He was as genuine a man as any I have met.

The arrangement I had made to sell my dress business temporarily fell through, and as the months went by I learned more and more about dress designing. . . .

It was an excellent opportunity to learn, not only about clothes, but also about human nature. I discovered that women can be just as jealous of each other as men can, which is saying something. They can also be very nearly as catty, though their cattiness often lacks the aggressive drive of the male. For really supreme cattiness I think a real 'pansy' is impossible to beat. To hear two of them discussing a third can be quite an education in itself, especially if they are 'theatricals'.

Although they are often very intelligent, we met one red-haired gentleman in a Paris cabaret who seemed, if not stupid, certainly not very well educated. A girl in our party told him that his face reminded her of the Mona Lisa. "I am afraid I do not know who that is," he said. We explained and he said, "I am sorry, I know no history." He rather interested the girl, and she suggested that she met him later on, after the show. "Come round to the stage door," he said. "Who shall I ask for?" "Oh, they all know me, just ask for Lucrezia Borgia." . . .

For some time the woman doctor who was supervising my case had been seriously ill, but she still arranged to see me several times a week in order to watch progress. One night she had a serious heart attack, but she thought not of herself but of me. She sent for one of the leading gland experts in the country, and he promised to take over the supervision of my case in the event of her death, which at the time seemed imminent.

Fortunately she recovered and continued to look after me herself, though I was often sent to consultants.

A definite change in the functioning of my mentality began to

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

become apparent. This showed itself in two ways. My mental processes seemed to be slightly slowed up, and I also showed signs of greatly increased powers of intuition. It had been expected that the change of hormone balance might well affect my brain in some way, but I realised that it would be impossible to differentiate between the effects of mental and physical changes.

Whatever the cause, the effect was that I quite definitely had greater powers of intuition. This evinced itself in many ways. The first time it happened I was walking along when I suddenly saw a man I recognised as George P. whom I knew well during the war. A moment later I saw that at second glance he was nothing like George P. Ten minutes later I ran into the real George P. The same sort of thing happened several times—it could not possibly be attributed to coincidence.

Sometimes when the telephone rang I would get a feeling that I knew who was calling, and I was right.

Another way in which I found myself changing was that now, for the first time in my life, I found I could read stories and novels with sustained interest. I always used to find that fiction rarely interested me, with the outstanding exception of P. G. Wodehouse. Now I could read almost any good story and be intrigued by it, and my library, which up to that time had consisted mainly of biographical and technical books, now grew appreciably.

My nature was becoming milder and less aggressive, and I found it much more difficult to summon up will-power when required. I certainly needed all the will-power I could muster in order to keep my weight down. I would have an occasional gargantuan meal and then starve for a day or so afterwards. I found it helped if I kept a written record of all I ate, it all looked such a tremendous amount when seen in writing that it assisted in reducing the intake.

Another 'gimmick' I employed was borrowed from 'Alcoholics Anonymous'. I kept a large, unopened box of

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

chocolates in a drawer, and somehow the knowledge that it was there and was going to stay there unopened helped me to pass sweet shops without excessive drooling!

Lisa and I went out to lunch one day in an Oxford Street restaurant. We sat at a table with our backs against the wall so that we could get a good view of everybody. It also allowed everyone to have a good look at us and it was interesting to see the reactions!

I noticed people would look at me, then look away, then look again, this time very much harder. They would whisper to their friends, who would also turn and stare.

I was wearing a blue double-breasted blazer, grey worsted trousers, brown leather shoes, grey socks, a cream shirt and dark blue tie. My hands were completely uncared for, and my hair was cut short. I was far from being dapper. Though reasonably clean, my clothes had obviously not been pressed, and I could not possibly be considered a dandy. I would have fitted better into the surroundings of Rowton House than the Savoy.

It is not difficult to lip-read the words 'pansy' and 'woman', and it was obvious that nearly everyone in the room was arguing about my sex. The waitress did not help matters by calling me 'Miss' loudly. After this experience I kept out of such places as much as possible, and when it was unavoidable I sat in a corner.

It has always seemed strange to me that the average person, though doubtless fundamentally very sympathetic and understanding, varies so much in behaviour towards people suffering from a disability.

If a man is blind he can be assured of kindness and sympathetic consideration from all. If he is deaf many people make fun of him, and if he has a speech impediment some sadists will even burst out laughing.

During the war I was in a bar with a fellow pilot whose face showed that he had been shot down in flames and had been

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

burned. We were asked to leave as one lady found it impossible to stand the sight of him. Naturally I refused to go and sent for the manager, but the psychological damage had been done. As it happened, it was the last leave he ever had in London, or anywhere else. He went back on to flying and was killed.

In the time I spent in the limbo of the intersex I was glad indeed that it was only a stage which I was passing through. Although many people were extremely kind and pleasant to me, a great many would go out of their way to treat me as though I were an unpleasant, perverted freak. They had no hesitation in making their attitude abundantly clear, and either considered that I had no feeling at all, or else wanted to hurt me as much as possible.

My voice used to be somewhere between tenor and baritone, now, on occasions, I would find myself unconsciously pitching it a little higher. This often happened when I answered the telephone in the dress establishment, as when I spoke for some time to Mary Morris, the actress. She told a mutual friend afterwards that she found it impossible to tell whether she was speaking to a man or a woman. The voice could have been either.

We had many famous clients, although we were only a very small concern. The actresses included Elizabeth Welch, Mary Morris, Vivien Leigh, Ursula Jeans, Mary Ellis, and Yolande Donlan. Other famous clients were the designer, Audrey Cruddass, and the writer, Ngaio Marsh.

One of the few clients I met myself was Robert Helpmann. We were making some stage costumes for him, but our conversation was about motor-cars—he was just taking out a British driving licence.

Naturally enough I kept this side of my interests completely separate from the motor engineering. One day I emerged from one of our shops in Beauchamp Place and ran straight into Sam Clutton, motoring journalist and driver.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

I was carrying a length of cyclamen chiffon, which I did my best to hide behind my back.

Occasionally I would find time to go to a dress show, and would always try to sit near the models' entrance. This enabled me to see the hasty, last-minute snags being coped with, and to hear the muttered imprecations and see the smiles being switched on and off like electric lights.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

NEARLY TWO DIFFICULT YEARS had gone by since treatment was first started, and now I had to go for examination by a specialist, for yet another independent opinion. The result of this particular examination was all-important to me: the whole of my future depended on it. As the day drew near I became more and more jittery and on the morning of the great day itself I was in an advanced state of dither. I forced myself to lie down for ten minutes, relaxing completely, and after this felt much calmer and better able to control myself. I had already discovered that now that I was not nearly so strong as before it was more difficult to control my body in moments of stress. On a recent occasion, when under a considerable nervous strain, I had actually found my knees knocking together! It was a very odd sensation. A tendency for my teeth to chatter had to be coped with too in moments of extreme stress, and I had become an expert at blushing.

One of my own doctors met me and I was ushered into the presence of the specialist. I was examined very thoroughly, X-rays and results of laboratory tests were brandished, then I was told to dress and the two men withdrew to the next room.

I put my ear to the door. "There is not the slightest doubt whatever," the specialist was saying. "The patient is quite definitely not a man—she is undoubtedly a woman."

As I finished dressing I was trembling with excitement and happiness. I wondered how long it would be before I need no longer wear those hated trousers.

It was now possible to take legal steps to re-register my birth.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Affidavits were sworn, a new birth certificate was issued, and I became legally a woman. This was at the beginning of 1951.

By this time the general pattern of the change was well established, and plans were made for my first operation. Although my sex was now predominantly female, there was still a lot of the masculine in my body, and though I was definitely a woman I was an abnormal one, and would remain so until nature's mistake had been put right and all traces of masculinisation were removed.

It was decided that the operation would take place in a few months' time. The surgeon who was going to do it was world-famous, and an appointment was made for me to go and see him for a preliminary consultation and examination.

I had heard a lot about him, and knew that although a very kind man he could also be remarkably outspoken when he felt so inclined. As I sat in the waiting-room I felt very nervous and was quite prepared for the worst.

A receptionist ushered me into his consulting-room, and indicated where I should sit. It was a room of medium size, beautifully but simply furnished. Against one wall was a threefold mirror, near-by was a couch. The door was directly behind me, which made me feel rather uncomfortable. It was rather surprising to notice that there were no pictures or photographs. I knew the surgeon had a reputation for being a very fine artist; then I saw just one photograph, alone in a silver frame, on a table at the far side of the room. It was the portrait of a king, a gift from him to the surgeon to whom he owed so much.

The door behind me clicked, and in came the man on whom my hopes for the future rested. He was kindness itself. I was completely at ease in a moment. We had a talk together, then he called an assistant and together they examined me and discussed technical details.

A special technique had to be evolved for the operation, which was the first of its kind to be carried out in England, and,

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

as far as was known, in the world. I left feeling very happy, and looked forward eagerly to the future.

When I got home I wrote a letter to the surgeon, saying how happy I was that he had taken my case, and how much I was looking forward to the completion of the operation, which I hoped would be as soon as possible. In reply I received a letter which shook me very much. I was told that it was quite impossible to rush things, that I should have to have at least two, and possibly three operations, that I must be very patient, and stop trying to bully him. It was all rather terse and upsetting, and I was very careful not to show any signs of impatience in future. This, of course, was exactly the effect the letter was intended to achieve!

For the time being it was essential for me to continue to dress as a man for part of the time, certainly where business was concerned. However, there was no reason why I should not start getting used to wearing skirts, as long as no one found out that I was leading what was more or less a double life. They would be bound to think I was up to some criminal activity, or spying for a foreign power, or possibly they might even guess the truth and I might get unwanted publicity.

I moved to another district, where I shared a house with Lisa. Here we experimented with my clothes and make-up and I began to discover what a lot there was for me to learn.

When I changed clothes I found that I changed personality too. I was an infinitely happier personality when in skirts, gloom and depression were unknown. It must have been very trying indeed for Lisa, but she never once made a mistake over her pronouns. In trousers I was always referred to in public as 'he' and in skirts as 'she'. I thought that sometime she would be bound to make a mistake and rather give the show away, but no, not once.

One evening we went out for a short stroll. Soon after turning into the main road we met a woman who lived a few doors away; she spoke to Lisa for a few minutes, and was

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

introduced to me. Lisa explained that I was the sister of the man who shared the house with her; this explanation seemed to be accepted, and my appearance did not arouse any particular interest or comment, I was very glad to notice. Still, it was obviously going to be very risky to be seen in the neighbourhood sometimes in trousers and sometimes in skirts, because sooner or later someone would be bound to recognise me. People would think it odd that 'my sister' and I were never seen together.

The problem was solved by Lisa, who knew a show-girl who looked just like me. She was a little taller, but otherwise when we were both in skirts it was difficult to tell us apart. She was an excellent sport, and readily agreed to be seen round the district with me on two or three occasions, with myself dressed as a male and with her wearing some of my more distinctive clothes.

I took her into one or two local shops, including the news-agent's, a hot-bed of gossip if ever there was one, and introduced her as my twin sister. They little realised that when they saw this girl a few days later it was actually me in the same clothes! Thanks to this scheme I managed to lead my double life without discovery.

It was only afterwards that I suddenly remembered my genetics and realised that twins looking identical are not always of the same sex! In making this mistake I was in good company, though. In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare introduced a pair of twins of different sex looking identical, Viola and Sebastian.

In spite of this precaution, I kept away from the district as much as possible when in skirts. One particular characteristic by which I might be recognised was my walk. During the war I had come across a case of an agent who had had his appearance and identity completely changed, but it was found that he could still be recognised by his walk. After endless experiments with different types of shoes and by consciously trying to vary his gait, they had found that the only way to make his walk

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

really completely unrecognisable was to operate on the tendons of his leg.

It was now about nine months after I had been re-registered and had become legally female. Arrangements were made for my first operation.

The operation was looked forward to with mixed feelings, and I heartily wished it were over. It was not so much that I was worried about the success or otherwise of the surgery, because I had complete confidence in the surgeon. It was, however, my first real excursion for any length of time into the outside world as a female, and I was not at all sure how I would be accepted.

As I still had to be able to appear in trousers on occasions, I could not, of course, grow my hair. It was, therefore, necessary to augment my own with the aid of a *postiche*, which made my hair appear much longer than it really was. Although the prevailing fashion was for short hair, I preferred mine to be worn as long as possible.

Arriving at the nursing home on the evening before the operation, I left my luggage and slipped out to a near-by café for a cup of tea with Lisa. We had just seated ourselves and ordered when, to our horror, we noticed through the window a mutual friend who had known me when I was a male. He entered the teashop and sat down at a near-by table, but somehow failed to recognise Lisa and did not seem to recognise me. My tea tasted like ink and we left at the earliest possible moment and went back to the nursing home.

Lisa and I were shown into my room, which was filled with beautiful flowers. The sight cheered me up a lot, and my morale certainly needed raising in view of the ordeal I knew I had to face. Lisa had sent the flowers.

My nurse came in. She was a dear, and I took to her at once. Looking at my companion and myself she tactfully asked which was the patient. I was put to bed and then had to deal with a stream of callers. Doctors, surgeons, friends, all had to be

### ROBERTA\* COWELL'S STORY

coped with. Finally I was left in peace. I realised I was scared stiff. There was so much which was going to happen in the near future which I could not foresee. I was off on an unknown road which had never been trodden by a human being before. There was nothing for it but to relax, hope the worst would not happen, but not be too surprised if it did. . . .

So many things could happen. Perhaps the operation would not succeed. (Afterwards I learned that several of the experts present thought the operation could not be done, and even if it was possible to carry it out, the results would not be satisfactory.) Perhaps I should be desperately uncomfortable afterwards and possibly in great pain. Maybe the story would leak out and life afterwards would be impossible. Soon enough I should know the answer to all this.

Now to go to sleep, the last night I should have with my body in its present form. . . .

Next morning a prick in the arm and I become drowsy. I wonder, I wonder, I wonder what it will be like when I wake up. I wonder if I *shall* wake up? I'm not afraid now. Another prick in the arm and I start whirling into the vortex of unconsciousness. Then I am awake, and feeling rather sick. The nurse is instantly alert. She tells me that it is now early morning. The operation has been performed, took six and a half hours, and was a brilliant success. The backs of my hands and the top of one foot are swollen and blue—this is where they put the anaesthetic in.

Below the waist I am firmly bandaged, with a little rubber tube fitted with a clip emerging from the folds; this is the end of a catheter. I feel as though the whole of my inside has been taken out. There is no pain and it all feels quite comfortable.

Later that day the surgeon came and removed the catheter and some packing. He told me that the operation for congenital absence of vagina was completed, perhaps a tidying-up operation would be needed at some future date—it was too early to say.

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

"As soon as possible I was put into a hot bath to reduce the swelling, but there was no pain and I was very comfortable. Everyone was kindness itself, and I was quite at ease. The stitches were taken out, a few at a time. Some were excruciatingly painful, being in a terribly tender spot, but finally, with extreme care, they were all removed and less than two weeks after my admittance to the nursing home I was back home again.

The operation made a tremendous difference to me psychologically. I felt quite different and very much happier. The results were almost miraculously good, and I was glad indeed to have this part of the metamorphosis completed.

Ideally, it would have been best at this stage to have gone right away and started life afresh somewhere else. This was impossible as I had to stay near London to be near my doctors.

After this operation I began at once to end all activities which had to be carried out in trousers, as it was becoming almost impossible to pose as a man. I felt that I was now truly a complete female, and masquerading as a male was repugnant to me.

Finally the day arrived when it was no longer necessary to wear trousers any more, and I was ready to have the next operation performed. Although my body had changed completely, beyond recognition, and my personality had undergone an almost complete metamorphosis, my face was still fundamentally the same.

It was certainly a lot younger-looking, and far softer than before, with a definite feminine aspect, but it was still quite recognisable, particularly in profile. There was an ever-present fear that I might meet someone I had known previously who would recognise me.

The plan, therefore, was to have my face drastically altered. Then I should not have to fear recognition, residual traces of masculinity could be removed, and, incidentally, I could be made better-looking.

Facial plastic surgery had always seemed to me to be a

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

particularly gruesome branch of surgery, and I was not looking forward very much either to the operation or to its immediate after-effects. There was also the possibility that I might not be happy with a new face, and it was certainly going to be a very strange feeling to lose the last trace of my old self.

So it was with rather mixed feelings that I attended the surgeon's consulting-rooms again, where he gave me a careful examination and decided exactly what was going to be done. This involved giving me a new upper lip, reshaping my mouth, and giving me a new and smaller nose, with just a hint of a tilt to the tip.

The shape of the proposed new nose was outlined on the side of my existing nose, and it was easy to see, with the aid of the triple mirrors, that this alone would improve my looks immensely.

Once more I arrived at the nursing home on the eve of the operation, and next morning I looked at my familiar face in the mirror for the last time—a strange experience. The usual injection to make me drowsy followed by a prick in the arm, and then I was awake again and it was all over.

My face was a mass of adhesive plaster, metal clips, stitches, and plaster-of-Paris. Each day a few clips and stitches were removed, my new upper lip felt as big and soft as a pillow, and I had the makings of two superbly black eyes. After five days came the eagerly awaited moment when the plaster cast was to be taken off my new nose, and I would be able to see it for the first time.

I was in a frenzy of impatience to see the result. At very long last off it came, and I took a look. It certainly looked wonderful, slightly *retroussé*, perfectly regular. "Of course," said the surgeon's assistant, "in a few days' time it will be twice the size." "What," I gasped, all my new-found pleasure vanishing, because it *did* seem perhaps just a fraction bigger than I had wanted. "Oh, sorry," was the reply, "I meant to say *half* the size," and I breathed again.

Next day I came home for the first time to a new flat. My face was still swollen and discoloured, and I had to stay out of sight for a couple of weeks. Incredibly enough, there were no scars visible, all the work had been done from the inside, even the cutting and shaping of the bone had been done in this way.

The day arrived when I could make my début in public in my finished state. Make-up had to be rather heavy as there was still a certain amount of marking to cover up. I had a new hair-do and a new hat, both designed to show off the new profile. Then with a heart pounding with excitement, and a stomach full of butterflies, I set out.

To get from the flat to the main shopping centre it was necessary to walk down a passageway. I set off resolutely and was half-way down the passage when I saw two men coming towards me. Resisting a wild impulse to put my head down and run, I approached them. As we passed, both men gave me a searching glance. My heart seemed to stop completely. Then one man said to the other, in a low but distinct voice, "Definitely, yes." I realised, with a sudden glow of pleasure, that my appearance was acceptable.

Later on that day, still wearing my rather heavy make-up, I was walking down Piccadilly when I clearly heard one woman, having given me a very prolonged stare, say to another, "I bet that one's expensive." I decided that the sooner I wore a lighter make-up, the better!

A few days after this I was back again on the operating table for a 'tidying-up' operation on my body. After this was completed there was no trace of a scar whatever. The surgeon had certainly done a wonderful job.

The rest was now up to me, and I had no idea at the time what a vast amount there was to learn. The problems to be tackled included those of clothes, deportment, etiquette, beauty treatment, and hairdressing, and when these had been mastered I should have to build up new social contacts.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Clothes did not present much of a problem. Having reduced my figure to the correct proportions, I had stuck to a rigid maintenance diet and had acquired proper eating habits. The surprising thing was that my figure was that of a 'womanly woman', with accent on the feminine. I was the type who should never be allowed to wear slacks, although unfortunately this type often does.

A basic wardrobe was chosen and here at least I was on familiar ground. My measurements had changed in the most amazing way within the previous few years. Bust was increased a good five inches, and hips increased by two inches—they had always been wide. My waist, on the other hand, decreased by five inches. By far the most surprising thing was that my height had decreased, this beyond a shadow of a doubt! The reduction in height was a good inch, possibly an inch and a half. It is not usual to measure height to an accuracy greater than that of a quarter of an inch, of course, so this has to be taken into consideration. The medical explanation for the height reduction was probable shrinkage of intervertebral cartilage, those discs of cartilage and fibrous tissue which are found between the bones of the spinal column, and now and again have been known to slip out of place.

As the reduction of height had only shortened my back, and not my legs, my proportions were improved, which was a very pleasant thing. Although as a male I had been rather on the short side, as a woman I was comparatively tall, particularly in heels. The shorter height was, therefore, 'particularly appreciated.'

It may seem extraordinary that a male who usually gave the impression of having dressed with the bedroom on fire should turn into a fashionably dressed female, very clothes-conscious, and paying meticulous attention to the all-important 'grooming'. The explanation lies in the fact that men's clothes were a symbol of masculinity, and I hated them for it. Women's clothes were for me symbolic of my new and happy life. Being

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

well-dressed made a world of difference to my confidence and composure, and I revelled in my new-found freedom to pander to a side of my personality which had been buried and suppressed for too long.

I could understand what the philosopher meant when he said that to a woman the sense of being well-dressed brings a sense of tranquillity which even religion fails to bestow.

When I first started to diet I received a great deal of contradictory advice, but this was nothing compared with the mass of conflicting information which confronted me when I started trying to learn about beauty treatment.

It seemed, and still seems, quite amazing that leading authorities should often differ to such an extent over fundamental points. In a book by a leading beauty expert the author, as an example of how ignorance of correct methods can ruin one's skin, describes how she met one woman who actually used to apply her powder direct to her face, without a foundation of any sort. The pores of the skin were thus clogged, and the unfortunate woman had a bad complexion through her ignorance and stupidity.

However, in another up-to-date book, this time by a doctor, a specialist in women's beauty care, the author states categorically that when the use of foundation can be dispensed with it is all to the good, the less that goes on the skin the better and the powder can be applied direct!

Surprisingly enough, my own skin, which had not only been completely uncared for all my life, but had been grossly ill-treated as well, did not seem to have suffered from the ravages of neglect as much as one would expect.

I was instructed to scrub it regularly with soap, hot water and a brush. I was also told that on no account must soap and water be used, only cream and lotion. I was advised to pumice-stone it regularly. I was told to have massage and face packs. I was advised not to have face packs or massage. Put cream on at night, never put cream on at night.

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Out of this welter of information and misinformation I gradually found what suited me, and what did not suit me. Most of the treatments seem to come in the latter category!

Plenty of sleep and fresh air and a proper diet certainly made far more difference than any treatments, but, like most women, I found there was something quite fascinating about trying out a new treatment or lotion, especially if it were expensive, which was usually the case. Even when it failed to have any perceptible effect, the money had hardly been wasted, because it was all such fun!

Learning how to move did not present much difficulty, at least I did not think it did, but nevertheless I was still learning and improving twelve months later. I had several teachers, as each had something new to offer.

Etiquette was something which I had hardly realised would have to be learned at all. As a result I made several mistakes, until I discovered what a lot I had to learn and did something about it. When to stand, when to sit, when to wear gloves, introductions, there was so much which I had never really been aware of before.

Happily plying the electric iron one day I dropped it on to my foot, whilst wearing open-toed shoes. "Oh, bother!" I exclaimed. The fact that I did not draw upon my extensive vocabulary of contumely was not due to self-control but to the fact that my general nature had become much milder. I had not anticipated that I was going to use different words when I spoke, but I found it necessary to choose my words carefully for the first few months because typically masculine phrases would tend to creep in, snatches of R.A.F. jargon and mannish expressions.

My voice did not really change, but became higher in pitch, better modulated, but with fewer overtones. It was essential to learn to cough and clear my throat differently. I rather wondered what sort of a noise I should make if suddenly startled. It was not long before I discovered. Returning home

to the flat late one night, I found the front door ajar; someone had broken into the flat. Lisa was away at the time, and as I turned on the light in the hall a strange man came from behind the door, pushed past me, and ran off. I found myself screaming at the top of my voice. It was a bloodcurdling sound, most impressive, and obviously a useful addition to my defensive armoury.

Hairdressing was a problem. I have always considered that the more feminine woman looks much better with longish hair. Short hair may have its advantages, but they are not æsthetic ones, unless the woman has a very well-shaped and nicely poised head.

Whilst my hair was growing I decided to wear a wig, which would probably be easier to manage than a *postiche*. Also there was the possibility that in the future it might be more convenient and advantageous to wear a wig rather than my own hair, thus avoiding spending vast amounts of time and money on the hairdresser.

However, I soon changed my mind about this. I had an invitation to have dinner at an extremely elegant London hotel. As I dismounted from the cab immediately outside the main entrance, I caught the top of my head on the top of the taxi doorway and for a ghastly moment I thought I had 'scalped' myself! Luckily this calamity was just avoided, but it was a very narrow escape indeed, and I decided that the sooner my own hair grew the better. . . .

I had no wish to undergo the same experience as the lady in the story. As she left her hairdresser's, resplendent in a new coiffure, she encountered a friend, who said, "My dear, what *have* you done to your hair? It looks like a wig!" "It is a wig." "Well, my goodness! I'd never have known it."

One of the things most useful to me in my new social life proved to be the lessons I received on how to hold and move my hands. It was much easier to appear poised and relaxed when my hands were held and moved in the correct manner. I

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

found that most women instinctively look at each other's hands and feet. Wearing well-fitting shoes for the first time in my life had the unexpected effect of reducing the size of mine. I was easily able to take an English size five and a half and later a five, without any trouble.

Lisa was a wonderful help. She would watch me closely, and comment on any small mannerisms which needed correcting. I used to stroke my face occasionally, a gesture which a man often uses, but a woman never. Standing back to the fire and going upstairs two at a time had to be avoided sedulously, but I was never quite so bad as the Wren who raised her hat to the Admiral! (He said afterwards that she must have mistaken him for a funeral.)

I never had the slightest difficulty in managing my skirts, and have never once instinctively buttoned up my coat the wrong way round, as a man does.

One evening Lisa came in from a date, and was explaining to me the significance of some of the coloured ties worn by men, such as I Zingari and Free Foresters. The man she had been out with had explained it to her. When I reminded her that this was all far from being new to me, she gasped, "Good heavens, I'd *completely* forgotten that!" This was certainly a happy moment for me, and she could not have paid me a nicer compliment.

I had by now begun to get used to having a new body and leading a different existence.

I felt that I had much in common with Lichtenburg's knife, which had a new handle fitted and then a new blade. Sometimes I would think about all that had happened to me, and it would seem so bizarre as to be almost unbelievable.

The psychologists had warned me that the mental adjustments would be my most difficult problem and would take a long time. How right they were. I just had to give things time to adjust themselves.

Temperamentally I had become vastly changed. The most

important difference was that I was now happy and now completely free from the periods of inky-black depression. I was more placid and less impatient and, as a direct contrast to my previous self, I now had a very strong maternal instinct.

About the only thing I knew about domestic work was the fact that it is unwise to boil coloured socks, especially those of variegated colours, together. This had been learned from hard experience. Now, of course, I had to learn to wash, iron, clean, cook and do all the other myriad things that a domestic worker does with such consummate ease that they appear simple until you try them.

My previous knowledge of cooking consisted of the fact that when cooking a cake you stuck a knife in it, and noticed whether or not it came out clean. I had no idea what you did if it did come out clean—stick all the other knives in, perhaps.

I discovered that cooking was surprisingly difficult and complicated, but very rewarding. I was particularly glad to find that the preparation of food had the effect of diminishing my appetite, instead of stimulating it as I had feared. Once the pastry had shot off the board on to the floor a few times I felt my yearning to consume it rapidly dwindling. Raw eggs were very reminiscent of unpleasantness generally, and I could not possibly eat a steak after having seen it raw.

Cooking was unexpectedly exciting, too. When my first soufflé was in the oven I was tremendously thrilled to find out how it would emerge. As luck would have it, it was an outstanding success, but when I made another as an encore, this unaccountably failed. I do not know which was more deflated, my pride or my soufflé.

Lisa once said to me that she could see very clearly that I was very much happier now that I was a woman, but she wondered if I would still be happy if I found that I was a very plain or ugly woman. My reply was a very definite and emphatic yes, I should still be happy.

There is no such thing as a plain or ugly woman, only those

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

who do not know how to make the best of themselves. Before the plastic operation on my face I was a living argument in favour of Darwin's theory, and I was surprised that no one ever tried to feed me nuts, but I was still able to give a convincing illusion of attractiveness with the aid of carefully applied make-up and a great deal of synthetic confidence.

Even if a woman is really so ugly that her face is actually malformed it can be vastly improved by modern surgery.

One of the most remarkable examples of this was carried out some years ago by a British surgeon. The patient was a fourteen-year-old girl who had an upper jaw set so far back that her lip almost touched her nose, which itself was crooked. The roof of her mouth was very sharply arched, and she could only speak with the greatest difficulty, while her eyes protruded so far out of her head that she looked permanently startled.

Several bones of her face were deliberately severed and re-positioned. The upper part of her face was pulled forward, and the final result of the operation was so remarkably successful that her parents found it difficult to believe that she had once been the pitiful little creature who had been doomed to go through life as a miserable freak.

The girl is now a pleasant-looking young nurse.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

FOR TWO YEARS I HAD BEEN, to all intents and purposes, unsexed. I was not particularly interested in either sex. When I visited a play or a film I did not identify myself with any of the characters, whether men or women.

Now that my body had developed into womanhood, I slowly began to be a little less asexual. At the theatre or cinema I found I tended to identify myself with the heroine. For the first time in my life I found it possible not only to start reading a love story, but to finish it. I had no desire at all to kiss a girl, the idea struck me as being almost as unthinkable as it would have been in my previous existence had I had an urge to kiss a man. When a man showed interest in me I ceased to regard it as a rather insulting nuisance.

It was a tremendous advantage to me to know a certain amount about the functioning of a man's mind, and I was very amused by the various types of approach offered. Some were brilliantly original, others very unimaginative. One of the most enterprising occurred when I was walking down Oxford Street. A man rushed across the pavement and pushed me bodily into the bar of a public-house. He then took off his hat and apologised profusely for having 'bumped' me, then brightly suggested that as we now seemed to have found ourselves near a bar, I might care to join him in a drink! There was also the perfect gentleman who would be most apologetic and charming and say something like, "Excuse me, I know it's very rude to speak to you, but isn't it a nice day?"

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Although my mother had refrained from telling me never to speak to strange men, I soon learned not to. They would ask me the way somewhere, then whilst I was giving directions would suddenly ask me out to dinner, or tea, or to a club. Having ignored these approaches for some time I decided it would be an interesting and instructive experience to see what happened if I accepted. A kindly government had, in the past, given me lessons in unarmed combat and I even knew a little ju-jitsu, and though I was no champion, I felt I could look after myself.

So when a car drew up and the driver asked me the way to Baker Street, and while I was telling him he added an invitation to go out to supper. I accepted.

We went to a small club, where everyone knew everyone else and there was a notice on the wall which read, "Visitors are requested to keep their seats when the room is in motion."

We had a pleasant little supper, then I asked to be taken home as it was getting quite late. We got in the car, but when he pressed the starter button there was a click and the starter refused to work. He had no idea what to do. I could have told him that the pinion of the Bendix drive was probably jammed against the flywheel teeth, and could be freed by rocking the car in gear or by using a set-spanner on the flats of the motor armature, but I wasn't supposed to know this. However, he telephoned the A.A. and got help. At long last I arrived home. Saying good-night to the gentleman at the front door I stepped into the hall, only to find him at my heels.

Lisa had been out that evening, and at this precise moment she arrived home with her boy-friend, the old school tie enthusiast. She had invited him into the flat for a nightcap, but he was warned to be as silent as possible because her girl-friend (me) was a rather quiet type and would probably have been in bed and asleep for hours. As they arrived at the front door they heard sounds of unarmed combat from within, opened the door, and there we were, fighting tooth and nail!

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Now, if anyone asks me the way to Baker Street, I say, "I'm sorry but I'm a stranger here myself."

There was one particularly strange phenomenon which I encountered, familiar to many women, but which most men have never even heard of. It is usually referred to as 'Good days and bad days'. Bertrand Russell once wrote an essay on women, in which he observed that real beauty is always intermittent. It is certainly a fact that on one day you find you 'go down' exceptionally well, with men whistling after you and asking the way to Baker Street, the following day, wearing exactly the same outfit no one seems to take a bit of notice. . . . Extraordinary!

A great deal, of course, depends on your mental attitude. If you behave as though quite confident of your own powers of attraction it seems to have a sort of hypnotic effect on people, and they come to believe it themselves.

When I started having regular social engagements with men, I found that Martin Luther had been quite right when he wrote, "No gown worse becomes a woman than learning." Most men seemed to expect and prefer a sort of helpless imbecility in their feminine companions, so I learned to be a good listener. Men revel in the implied flattery of rapt attention.

Now and again I would meet a 'line-shooting' type and it was sometimes difficult to resist the temptation to lead him gently up the garden path, and then trip him up, figuratively speaking.

A heavily moustached figure, alleged ex-fighter type, but who had obviously flown nothing heavier than a Tiger Moth, was led on to describe some of his more exciting operational trips. I let him get to the point where he was force-landing his Spitfire with the hydraulics shot away, at very high speed because he couldn't lower the flaps, then blandly asked him why his Spitfire was so different from all the others in service, which had pneumatically-operated flaps. As *Punch* would have said, "Collapse of stout party."

### ROBERTA GOWELL'S STORY

'Line-shooting' is by no means confined to the male sex, of course. At a night club I heard a woman say to a photographer, "Please don't take my picture, there must be other glamorous women here!"

At lunch one day I found myself seated at table next to a man I had known well during the war. Although I knew he couldn't possibly recognise me, his presence did little to stimulate my appetite, and I was glad when the meal was over.

People generally were infinitely nicer to me now than they used to be. This was particularly noticeable when travelling by train. Porters and ticket collectors were civil and attentive, and dining-car attendants almost embarrassingly so. Getting on a bus, I heard a man say, "Get up and give the lady your seat, Billy." Looking down I saw the man. He had a broad grin on his face and Billy, who was a small boy, was sitting on his knee!

Perhaps the best example of the changed attitude occurred in the days when I was obliged to spend some of the time as a male and some as a female. I went out to buy an evening paper from an old man with a pitch on a near-by street corner. I had nothing less than a shilling, and this he refused to change, grumbling that he couldn't be bothered, although I could see he had a box full of coppers on his stand. Next night I was in skirts, and still had no change. This time, however, he gave me a paper and told me to pay him any time I liked.

In the past I had no very high opinion of women car drivers, although I had met one or two who were exceptionally good, very much better than the average man driver. Maybe my low opinion of feminine driving ability in general had been based on a series of unfortunate experiences. I had a female cousin who could never remember in moments of crisis which way the steering wheel had to be turned, and a girl-friend who would shut her eyes, let go of the wheel and scream whenever danger threatened.

Then there was the lady who drove me along the main road,

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

put out her hand, encased in a large fur glove, then instantly turned off to the right. We were at once rammed amidships by a following car. The gentleman driving it was charmingly apologetic, and said that he did not realise the lady was making a signal, but thought she was throwing the cat out of the window. . . .

The same lady used to drive about town with the choke pulled out so as to have something to hang her handbag on. As women generally are less interested in mechanical things than men, they perhaps take less interest in the actual functioning of the car. I heard of a lady who tried to top-up the sump of her new car through the dip-stick hole. She wrote to the manufacturers and suggested they made it larger.

My mother once walked into the house with the gear lever in her hand. "Look," she said, "the post has come off."

Aircraft pilots seemed to pay less attention to the maintenance of their cars than anyone else I have known. Some of them would just drive and drive until something happened. If the radiator boiled they added water, if the oil pressure fell to zero and a mild clanking emanated from the engine, then the time had come to add oil to the sump, whilst if the car refused to go at all, then obviously one must put some petrol in it.

Despite the fact that insurance statistics show that women drivers are safer than men, however odd their technical knowledge may be, I found that when I drove men passengers they behaved in a very peculiar manner. At crucial moments they would put their fingers in their ears to dull the sound of the impending crash, whilst at the slightest provocation they would go by train, or even walk. I can only put this down to the effect of insidious propaganda. Lisa, however, stoutly maintains that now, as a woman, I do not drive nearly as well as I did a few years ago.

Many and varied were the characters I met, but it was all useful experience. A rather suave gentleman turned out to be

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

a super-spiv of sorts, who numbered greyhound racing amongst his activities. He told me that a lot of 'fixing' went on, and he could often forecast the result of a race with a very considerable degree of certainty. I innocently said, "I suppose they dope the dogs?" He seemed quite upset at this idea, and so I apologised. Apparently it was all a question of knowing the form. "No," he said, "what we do is make 'em swallow steel balls, the more they swallow the heavier they get and the slower they run."

As I had spent most of my life with the masculine side of my nature predominating to the almost complete exclusion of the feminine, it was inevitable that an over-adjustment should take place after the change. It was many months before I realised that there was such a thing as being too feminine, and that if I were to be a properly adjusted adult both sides of my nature would have to become integrated, to a certain extent at least.

It was quite a surprise to find that the traces of the stronger side of my personality were not considered undesirable; both men and women seemed to react better when confronted with the more dominating side of my character, men especially.

The psychologists were certainly right when they warned me that the most difficult part of the change-over would be psychological. It was necessary to establish a new personality, to curb undesirable tendencies as they arose, and to cultivate the traits which seemed most acceptable.

It was pointed out to me that some of the world's most attractive women have a definitely masculine side. Marlene Dietrich has been described by Kenneth Tynan as having sex, but no particular gender. She used to wear men's clothes on occasions. Greta Garbo called at the house of Howard Greer, the Hollywood dress designer and was refused admission by his mother, who thought she was a boy in woman's clothes!

Hildegarde Neff, who has a deep voice like Dietrich, is reputed to have masqueraded as a soldier in the German army, when escaping from Berlin at the end of the war. She is

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

typical of a kind that is feminine enough to be liked by men, but women also sense that there is a touch of masculinity and like her for it.

When I felt I had reached the end of the period of transmogrification (good word, that!), the time came for me to be re-introduced to my parents. I had kept in touch by letter and telephone, but I felt it best that they should not meet me whilst the change was going on, although they had met my doctors.

As things turned out I was to be very glad that they had had all the technical details of my case carefully explained to them, because when, later on, the case of Christine Jorgensen received world-wide publicity they clearly realised that my case was a very different one.

First I arranged to meet my father. Characteristically he arrived on the stroke of four p.m., the exact moment at which he was due. I was just about as nervous as I have ever been in my life. As I opened the door I saw him start violently. A moment later he controlled himself, followed me into the lounge and we had tea together. I guessed the poor man would be as nervous about the meeting as I was, but he showed no trace of nervousness or embarrassment, and this certainly had a reassuring effect on his newly acquired daughter. The cup rattled rather loudly on the saucer as I passed him his tea, but I avoided slopping it into the saucer by cheating and only filling the cup three-quarters full.

I was soon completely at ease. The only reference of any sort that he made to my femininity was when he said he hoped I would never paint my toe-nails scarlet!

Precisely forty-four minutes later he looked at his watch, and announced that he must be going. As I closed the front door on him I realised I was trembling with violent nervous reaction. It must have been a strange experience for him. . . .

Next day my mother came to tea. On the previous day I had been so nervous before meeting my father that I considered that I just could not be any more strung up whatever

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

happened. I had not, however, considered how I was going to feel when meeting Mother for the first time!

There was no real reason why I should feel terrified, because I knew she would be very sweet and kind to me, but I think probably I was afraid that she would not like me as a girl, and also she would find me so changed that she would feel that I was responsible for having done away with her son, which I suppose in a way I was.

I had told my parents quite frankly that I could have had myself masculinised and then have continued to live as a male. But that once I knew I was genetically female, and had female characteristics, then I could only do everything possible to become a member of the sex which I should have belonged to from birth, if my development had not taken place along the wrong lines.

Once medical science had shown me that I was basically and fundamentally female I could hardly be expected to be artificially masculinised and continue to live a miserably unhappy life amongst a sex to which I now knew I did not really belong.

I knew my mother had had this explained to her, but I could not be sure that she really understood my feelings. Hence my nervousness, which became worse as tea-time drew near.

I heard the 'Ping' of the taxi-meter outside, and, taking a deep breath, I went to the door.

She did not start when she saw me as my father had done—maybe he had warned her not to. We went into the lounge and she sat down, I went out to the kitchen to make the tea. Carefully warming the pot, I rinsed it out and then made the tea. I had just put it on the tray and was about to return to the lounge with it when a horrid thought struck me. Taking off the tea-pot top I looked inside. The water was colourless, I had forgotten to put the tea in!

Hastily I made it properly, at any rate the pot would be

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

nicely warm now—and carried the tea in, half-expecting any moment to fall flat on my face with the tray.

Poor Mummy was doing her best to make me feel at ease, but the atmosphere was rather tense. We talked of the old times; she recalled how my little brother had been taken to a concert, and had said, "Doesn't good music hurt your hands?" We remembered how embarrassing it was in church when he loudly enquired, "That man wearing the sheet, is he the Holy Ghost?"

Then we talked of clothes. I showed her sketches and photographs of some of my work. I think it was only then that she realised the extent of the change—how could this work be produced by someone who was once a horrible grubby little boy who refused to learn the names of flowers and who once took the vacuum cleaner to pieces and used it as a basis for a television set—which worked.

After she had gone I felt as though I had been filleted and then put through the wringer. We met several more times before we were really at ease in each other's company. Then we became the firm friends we are now.

One of my new men friends was a newspaper reporter who worked on the staff of a national daily. Late one night he telephoned me and excitedly told me that an American soldier was reported to have been changed into a woman by doctors in Denmark. It had just been announced on the radio station of the American United Forces Network.

He knew that I was very interested in medical science and asked me if I thought there could be any truth in the report. I told him that it was quite likely to be perfectly true. Probably the man would be a transvestite, with an irresistible urge to dress as a woman. Such cases, particularly if not strongly sexed, often asked doctors to make them into women. There are many authentic cases of this happening. The earliest known seemed to be that of Sporus.

After the death of his wife, Poppaea, Nero had searched far

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

and wide for someone who resembled her as closely as possible. There was one person whose face was exactly like that of the late Empress, but it belonged to a man, a young freedman named Sporus. The Emperor ordered his surgeons to transform him into a woman. They did the best they could, and when Sporus had recovered from the operation, Nero formally married him. It was a most extravagant wedding, with a great deal of pomp. The 'bride' wore a rose-coloured veil.

No doubt the Romans wished that Nero's father had had such a wife. . . .

Numerous other stories of such happenings have come down through the ages. I told my reporter friend that modern discoveries in hormone therapy and operating techniques had made such drastic alterations likely to be more effective and convincing, but suggested that there would be a good deal of controversy over the medical, moral and legal angles of such a case. I told him of Steinach's experiments with female hormone injections into castrated male guinea-pigs, which developed some characteristics of the female type.

After giving my friend some details of well-known cases of natural changes of sex, which had not been artificially induced, I hung up.

As I went to bed that night I wondered just what he would say and think if he knew all there was to know about me. . . .

Poor man, he'd have had a fit!

## CHAPTER NINE

IT IS A VERY NATURAL DESIRE to want to be 'different', but those unfortunates who are very different indeed from their fellow-creatures fervently wish that they could be normal human beings and not freaks. So-called 'changes' of sex do occur from time to time, but it is usual to make every effort to avoid publicity. This fact was emphasised to me by my bearded philosopher friend, who told me that if his history were known it would result in his life being ruined.

People are apt to hate and fear the unfamiliar. Only a few hundred years ago it was common practice to crucify an hermaphrodite, and in Basle a cock was solemnly tried and publicly burned alive in the market-place for the unnatural crime of laying an egg.

Today, thanks to the spread of sex-education, we are very much more enlightened. The unfortunate intersex is no longer dealt with as though personally responsible for being physically abnormal.

On September 12th, 1952, an announcement in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* announced that a Scottish doctor, previously a woman, was now a man. Forty years of age, he showed remarkable courage, and was very highly thought of by patients and neighbours.

The doctor did not undergo an operation, as it was not needed, but he had undergone male hormone treatment. As a child, a strong dislike of frills and flounces was shown, and an Eton crop was adopted. He became an expert shot and was fond of fishing. Now he is married and respected and loved by all.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Less than three months later newspapers all over the world carried the astonishing story of Christine Jorgensen. Two years previously, a twenty-four-year-old American man, George Jorgensen, junior, a transvestite, had sailed from New York in the liner *Stockholm*. He became a patient of Dr. Christian Hamburger, chief of the Hormone Department of the Statens Serum Institut in Copenhagen. After some preliminary experiments, permission was granted by the Danish Department of Justice, and operations were performed. As a result of this the former U.S. soldier, who had been a clerk at Fort Dix, received permission from Washington to have a new passport, and was free to dress and live as a woman.

Christine wrote home to her parents in the Bronx and said, "Nature made a mistake which I have had corrected, and now I am your daughter." Somehow the story was released to the newspapers, and world-wide interest resulted. The Scandinavian Society of New York awarded the title of 'Woman of the Year' to Christine Jorgensen, and she was also given a scroll from the Scandinavian Societies of Greater New York for her contribution to science.

Because of the tremendous publicity given to the case, and its erroneous character, the Danish physicians disclosed the fact that the patient had never been a pseudo-hermaphrodite, or a person with two sets of sexual characteristics, one being dormant. She was classified as a transvestite, a person with an irresistible urge to wear the clothing of the other sex.

Not all the publicity was favourable, for in New York Judge Ploscowe was reported to have demanded a police investigation, and the famous American columnist, Walter Winchell, was sceptical, to say the least. G.I.s in Korea elected her 'Miss Neutral Zone'.

Professor Dahl Iverson was quoted by the Scandinavian newspapers as saying, "Christine Jorgensen has had treatment here and has undergone a complete change of sex. A young man has changed sex, and from my point of view that is all

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

there is to it." He was told of the doubts expressed by the American judge, and said, "One cannot expect a judge to comprehend a medical question." The U.S. Ambassador in Denmark signed a certificate saying that Christine Jorgensen is legally a woman.

Christine is now performing in cabaret and has made not only headlines, but a great deal of money.

The distinctive feature of this case was, of course, the fact that the change was apparently entirely artificially induced, but it was by no means the first time this had happened.

The famous sexologist, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, has described the case of an individual known first as Rudolf, then as Dora. Rudolf had several brothers and sisters, all of them healthy and normal. Until he was six years old he was distinguished only by his docility and the fact that he preferred to play alone rather than with the other children.

In those days it was usual to make a very young child wear a girl's dress. When this child's parents tried to get him to wear a little boy's suit he became far from docile, and fought with all his strength against being forced to dress as a boy. He was discovered trying to convert himself into a little girl with the aid of a piece of string. He was still in his sixth year, and was only just stopped in time. During the following years he wore his sister's clothes whenever possible, and as he developed sexually he exhibited tendencies of a homosexual nature. His mania for transvestism became stronger, he left home, and managed to live the life of a woman.

In 1921, when about thirty years of age, he had himself operated on, and later, in 1930, two more operations were performed as a result of which his body was, externally at least, changed to that of a female.

A much publicised case of a very different type was that of the Danish painter, Einar Wegener, whose life has been published as a book entitled *Man into Woman* published in 1933.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

He was brought up as a perfectly normal boy, both physically and mentally. He married at the age of twenty, his wife was also a painter and the marriage was a happy one. His wife was painting the portrait of a popular actress. One day when she was unable to attend a sitting, Einar was persuaded to take her place and pose for the drapery and legs. For a joke his wife disguised him completely as a woman, and the disguise was so successful that it was repeated on a number of occasions. They were living in Copenhagen at the time, and Einar used to attend carnivals and balls, and posed for many of his wife's pictures and drawings.

They moved to Paris, where from time to time he continued to masquerade, posing for his wife and also taking part in theatricals. When disguised as a woman he was called 'Lili'. Then he began to perceive a change within himself. He began to feel the 'Lili' was a real individual, sharing the same body as Einar. He began to suffer from sporadic bleeding from the nose and elsewhere, and visited many doctors, without getting any help or relief.

He consulted medical books and became convinced that he was internally physically abnormal. By the time he was forty years old he had become desperately unhappy and was contemplating suicide. Then he met a German doctor who was prepared to help him.

Examination showed that his body had undoubtedly female conformation and a series of operations were carried out. The presence of rudimentary ovaries was established, and ovarian tissue from a healthy young woman of twenty-six was transplanted into him. This was of course before modern hormone therapy was available. The Danish authorities issued a new passport in the name of Lili Elbe and the King of Denmark declared the marriage annulled.

The wife married a mutual friend of theirs, and a French painter, who had been an old friend of Einar and his wife for many years, fell in love with Lili.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Before Lili could marry she had to have one more operation which would enable her to function completely as a woman and a mother. This was carried out, but she died shortly afterwards of heart trouble.

Some time before she died her story had leaked out, through an indiscreet friend, and it caused a great sensation in the year 1931. I did not hear of this case until my own treatment was well under way, but when I came to read the book I noticed many similarities between our two cases.

Cases of women who have become men are not uncommon, although the reverse is very rare indeed. More than one woman who has changed sex joined the Foreign Legion, including Giovanna Lavagna, of Bologna, a beauty in her early twenties who was engaged to an R.A.F. officer in the First World War. She developed a deep voice and powerful muscles and became a soldier. If such a change were to happen today it would be possible to restore her femininity by suitable treatment.

Poor Giovanna—a minute quantity of the wrong chemical in her body, and she not only lost her lover, but had to face a new existence, and a pretty terrible one at that.

Amongst the few known cases of men who have become women perhaps the most remarkable is that of a Polish sergeant who, according to reports, turned into a woman and became a mother in 1936. The baby weighed nine pounds and was quite normal.

In 1951 a German boy in Munich officially changed his sex *twice*. He was born in 1932 a boy, then was operated on at the age of one year and became a girl. The birth was re-registered. When the girl was nineteen a beard started to grow and the police began to be rather suspicious of the somewhat burly 'girl'. She attended a Munich clinic, had two operations and was then re-registered as a boy. Six more operations were required before the change was quite complete, and the unfortunate patient became a properly functioning male.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

In 1949 Mr. Wynsley Michael Swan died, leaving a widow, Olive Mary Swan. They had been married in 1927. Mr. Swan had been left a residue in trust under his father's will, and the case was brought into court because the money was left to Wynifred Mary Swan. Miss Swan had been a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps during the First World War, and had changed sex completely in 1923.

The court had to decide whether the estate could be dealt with upon the footing that Wynsley Michael Swan, deceased, was the same person as Wynifred Mary Swan.

The Judge decided that there was no difficulty in giving effect to the will and, for that purpose, disregarding the change of sex. He remarked, "There is nothing very terrible about this, it is a peculiar case, but not unknown."

The evidence showed that the birth was registered at first as that of a girl, in 1874; and that after the change he married and lived a perfectly normal life with his wife. There were no children.

Transvestites represent a high degree of psychological inter-sexualisation. Cases are very common indeed and have been since the two sexes first began to wear distinguishing clothes; socially and psychologically they present much more of a problem than those with physiopathological disturbances, that is, malfunction of the mechanism of sex determination.

I had been discussing transvestism with a doctor, and casually mentioned that I had never come across a case, as far as I knew. A few days later the telephone rang, and a funny little voice said that it was a patient of the doctor I had recently seen, and the doctor thought perhaps I might be interested to meet him. Being particularly busy at the time I said this would be impossible for a few days at least, and the voice sounded a little disappointed. "I was rather hoping," he said, "to meet you tonight, in the West End. I shall, of course," he added, "be wearing woman's clothes." I thought this would be far too good to miss, so arranged to meet him, though in a

slightly less conspicuous spot than the one he had suggested, which was Oxford Circus Tube station!

When I told Lisa what had happened she said, "This I must see." So off we went to our strange rendezvous. We decided that either he would be very young indeed, and thus able to get away with it, or so old and awful that nobody cared, anyway.

We approached the spot where the meeting had been arranged and saw an extraordinary figure standing there. From fifty yards away, and after dark at that, it could only have been a man. He wore an off-white fur fabric coat (very much off white), lisle stockings, big black *boots* which looked like violin cases, a head scarf with a tuft of straight, thinning hair, escaping from the front. His face, unmistakably masculine, was dabbed with white powder.

Our first inclination was to walk straight by, but we realised that if no one turned up his feelings might be badly hurt, so we introduced ourselves. He said the name was Mary, and asked how we thought he looked. We said we thought he looked charming but we really must be going in a few minutes. He offered to come round to tea with us, provided there were no children in the neighbourhood. I told him that unfortunately the entire neighbourhood positively teemed with them.

A few months later I asked the doctor about 'Mary'. He said he had not seen him for some time, but rather gathered he had intended to get married to a woman who proposed to take him in hand.

A year later a friend told us that he had been exchanging letters with a transvestite, and the writer had promised to come up to town and meet him at Piccadilly Underground Station. He told Lisa and me that we could come along and have a look if we wanted to, but must keep out of the way.

At the appointed time Lisa and I duly arrived, exchanging glances with our friend, who was already installed in position. "There he is," we said simultaneously, pointing in different

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

directions. She was pointing at a rather burly woman with an incipient moustache, whilst I had picked on an odd-looking creature with a figure like an inverted pear.

For the next ten minutes we had a large number of false alarms, then at long last up tripped the transvestite. We both gasped. It was Mary! But a transformed Mary. She looked years younger, still masculine when you knew the secret, but then so, apparently, were half the other women in London! Her hair was uncovered, and done in little curls which made it look quite thick, she wore high-heeled shoes, which, though obviously a few sizes too small, made her feet quite presentable.

It seemed that married life suited her!

Transvestism is a lot more common than is generally realised, and its causes have been carefully studied. The psychological effect of clothes is a much more powerful thing than most people think. There are very few transvestites who appear in public, but a great many who appear in private. If they are men they are often rather ashamed about their proclivity.

Some men go about the house in skirts and rationalise their behaviour by saying, "It gives me a sense of freedom." Many women also go about their homes in trousers, and, oddly enough, explain, "It gives me a sense of freedom."

Psychologists explain the reasons why men behave in this rather bizarre way. They say that it is usually basically due to deep-seated homosexual tendencies; the subject tends to identify himself with his mother or mother surrogate. He therefore wants to dress like her. He may also have an unconscious fear of losing his masculinity. The subject unconsciously feels that in female clothes he is safe from mutilation. Another factor usually present is Narcissism, which is a trait present in many men but cannot always find expression. Yet another factor present is some degree at least of fetishism; clothes are the symbol of the opposite sex and the subject identifies himself with them. Often an element of masochism is present.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Sometimes a child is turned into a transvestite by being forced to wear clothes of the opposite sex, and thus conditioned to behave as though of the wrong sex.

Analysis shows that some, and often all, of these causations are present in the male transvestite. They can be removed by psychotherapy, given the full co-operation of the patient, who must really want to be cured.

There is strong anthropological evidence that the basis of transvestism is, in the main, a homosexual one. It can hardly be considered a manifestation of heterosexuality. It is important to stress, however, that the homosexual element is nearly always entirely unconscious, often very deeply so, and such men frequently strenuously deny that they have the slightest tendency in this direction.

They are often happily married and have children. Their own explanation of their peculiarity is that they just happen to have a love of wearing the clothes of the other sex, it makes them happy to do so, and they feel it gives expression to the female element inside them.

Occasionally a transvestite with exhibitionistic tendencies will venture forth in public. There is no actual law which states that it is illegal for him to wear female clothes, any more than there is a law to prevent women wearing trousers. However, he can be charged with insulting behaviour, or with conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace. He will almost certainly get fined, and may even go to prison for importuning, but the worst part of his punishment will be the publicity and ridicule which he may receive. He will also most likely be taken for a homosexual, though in all probability he is nothing of the sort.

There are various obvious reasons why people with such tendencies should be discouraged, if only for their own protection. There have been cases of murder resulting from a discovery that the true sex of an individual is not the apparent one.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Female transvestites are much easier to understand. They usually have a straightforward desire to be men, and the nearest they can get to it is to dress the part. Often there is a homosexual component, and sometimes the clothes of the opposite sex are worn for purely functional purposes, as by Joan of Arc.

From the earliest times cases have been recorded of men who dressed as women and women who dressed as men.

Hercules, Julius Cæsar, Philip, Duke of Orleans, the Chevalier D'Eon, and the Abbé de Choisy come to mind immediately amongst the males, and amongst the women, Dr. James Barry, Lady Hester Stanhope, George Sand and Colonel Barker.

Dr. Clifford Allen, who has made a study of hermaphrodites, states that those brought up as males did not show either homosexual tendencies nor did they behave as transvestites; a fact that seems to show that the cause is in the mind rather than in the body.

In my own case I was never either a transvestite or a homosexual, my inclinations were normal, simply died, then when they appeared again, they were re-orientated. By this time I was of the opposite sex anyway, so still was not homosexual.

If the normal man or woman were to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex they would look quite absurd, and it would be perfectly easy to detect them, either by their appearance or by their actions. It is obvious, therefore, that where an individual is able without any effort to pass when properly dressed as a member of the opposite sex, there must be some physical factor at work.

As medical science discovers more about the mind and the body, perhaps it will discover a solution to the problem of the transvestite.

## CHAPTER TEN

A GREAT DEAL HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT CHANGE OF SEX, and from time to time a case is described which arouses great public interest. Perhaps not the least interesting aspect of this matter is the fact that many leading authorities claim that change of sex is quite impossible in human beings!

The late Dr. Norman Haire, who was a leading expert on sex, stated categorically that there is no authentic case of a change of sex in human beings. He considers that what happens is that the sex of the child is wrongly diagnosed at birth because of faulty development. When it gets older it may develop into a member of the sex which is the opposite of the one in which it has been brought up. In cases of sexual ambiguity it is usual to bring the child up as a boy, at least until the true sex can be positively established. If the child should unmistakably begin to develop into a girl, then the sex is 'changed' and it is brought up as a girl.

In order to explain what happens in greater detail it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the biological principles involved. Enormous strides have been made in this field within the last few decades, and a great deal of light has now been shed on problems which previously baffled the medical scientists, but there is still a great deal more to be learned, and intensive research continues.

The first important thing to get clear is the exact difference between man and woman. Many people think that a man is a man because he has testes, and a woman is a woman because she has ovaries. This is a wrong conception. Modern biology

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

has demonstrated that sex is based not in the gonads but in the genes. The gonads have an important function, but they are only the senior executives, the function of the genes is that of the governing director.

It is common knowledge that the human body is built up of a number of tiny cells, minute units each of which has in its centre an infinitesimally small particle of matter, which is called the nucleus. No cell can live unless a nucleus is within it.

It is also a well-known fact that cells can multiply by a process whereby each splits into two, so that one cell can form two new cells.

What is not so well understood is the fact that the nucleus, which, of course, has to divide when the cell does, bisects in a very remarkable way. Instead of just splitting into two equal portions it becomes sorted out into a collection of rods known as chromosomes.

The peculiar, and very important, thing about the chromosomes is that each single cell of an animal of one particular type has a nucleus which will form an *identical* collection of chromosomes.

These chromosomes are responsible for making us the kind of people that we are. They determine our sex, and they determine the colour of our eyes. Inherited factors are transmitted by them. The actual mechanism by which hereditary factors are produced is not yet fully understood, but it is known that in some way thousands of genes, as the hereditary factors are called, are carried by each chromosome.

As yet these genes cannot be seen, but it is known that they are in the same order on each chromosome in each cell. They are actually chemicals which control every aspect of human development. They control our fingerprints, and they are responsible for the fact that we are born with two arms and two legs.

In the human animal there are always exactly forty-eight chromosomes in each cell. Never more and never less. When a

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

cell divides, the nucleus divides too, and so does each chromosome, so that each cell now still has forty-eight chromosomes in it.

At the moment of conception, the sperm from the male penetrates the egg in the female and activates it in such a way that, in each and every cell the baby-to-be has in it half the original chromosomes of the father and half of the mother.

The forty-eight chromosomes are paired together, twenty-three of the twenty-four pairs are identical, whether they belong to a male or a female, but the key to the whole question of sex-determination is found in the twenty-fourth pair, which are known as the sex-chromosomes. They determine the sex of the individual.

Nature can sometimes be very wasteful, and millions of cells are supplied by the male at the time of conception, although only one of them reaches the egg and fertilises it.

Half the sperm have sex chromosomes of the male type, and the other half have the female ones. Sex is therefore determined at the moment of fertilisation, and is *genetic*.

One obvious fact emerges from this. The baby-to-be must be either fundamentally male or fundamentally female, so there can be no such thing as a true hermaphrodite. Whether the baby is male or female depends on whether the sex-chromosomes of the male sperm are of the male type or the female type.

The moment the sperm enters the egg the genetic sex of the child is determined. As it develops, every single cell in its body will have an identical set of chromosomes, carrying the same sex-determining function.

In the foregoing account a tremendously complicated process has been outlined in the simplest possible terms, and all but the most important details have been omitted.

Professor R. Goldschmidt, of Berlin, has made a special study of anomalies in animals and plants, and he has developed

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

a theory about intersexes in human beings. His theory is that all human intersexes were originally intended to be female; that is to say the egg from which they came was fertilised by a sperm which had female-type sex-chromosomes.

Every cell in the body of the intersex is therefore female, and will always remain so. However, disturbances during development may cause changes in the way the body structure develops, and the changes will be so drastic that a girl baby may develop normal male organs and glands.

A girl baby who grew up with the wrong organs and glands would only be able to produce chromosomes of the female sex type, unlike a normal male who produces approximately equal quantities of each in the sperm. Therefore, although apparently a completely normal male, only female children could be procreated.

Some authorities believe that this theory is a true one, and they consider that completely normal males who seem to be unable to procreate male children may be the most complete type of sex reversal. Both my children were female.

It will be possible to test this theory in the future, when present attempts to separate the two different types of sperm have been successfully completed and tests applied to appropriate cases. When the male- and female-producing type of sperm can be separated, it may also be possible to choose whether a child will be a boy or girl.

Intersexuality is caused when something goes wrong in the sex-forming mechanism; little is known as yet about the functioning of the sex-formative impulse.

The human embryo is bisexual; potentially it is capable of developing into a male, into a female, or into a combination of both. It starts off by developing as both a male and a female; then the sex-formative impulse takes over, and either a masculinising impulse begins to stimulate the development in the direction of masculinity, at the same time inhibiting development of feminine potentials, or the reverse.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Every human being, therefore, has the rudiments of the dual sex state within them. Such a thing as a one hundred per cent man or a one hundred per cent woman simply does not exist.

When the embryo is just over an inch long the gonads—the sex glands—begin to form. At this stage the gonads are bisexual, and it is only after the seventh week of development that the stage of uni-sexuality is approached. Then each gonad, which at this stage is an ovotestis—(combined ovary and testis)—receives either the impulse to form an ovary and stay where it is, or to form a testis and then ultimately descend into the scrotum.

The genital organs, which up to this time have been developing rudimentary characteristics of both sexes, now begin to assume a shape approximating to their final form. When a masculinising impulse is at work the female ducts disappear, leaving only vestigial traces. The labia combine and form the scrotum, and so on. The feminising impulse causes the tract of the male ducts to vanish, leaving only the slightest traces, and the female ducts develop and form the tubes and also unite to form uterus and vagina, the rest of the system developing and forming in a similar manner.

It is perhaps not surprising that such a complicated and involved evolution as this should occasionally fail to take place exactly as it should; faulty development sometimes, though rarely, takes place, and this can cause intersexuality.

The cause of intersexuality may not, however, be a deep constitutional one, it may be directly due to malfunctioning of the glands. My own case was due to a combination of both these factors.

It is a widely-known fact that what we are depends to a great extent upon our glands, and few people can have had a better opportunity than the writer of having this fact clearly demonstrated to them!

The type of gland referred to is the endocrine organ which discharges secretions into the blood. There are several of

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

these in the human body, and their function is a most vital one.

These glands perform their work by putting out hormones. Hormones may either act as stimulating agents or they may have a repressive action; they are the chemical messengers of the body. Throughout human life the glands are at work, putting minute quantities of vital hormones into the blood stream, and these tiny traces of chemicals are of absolutely essential importance.

The endocrine system is not just a set of isolated glands, each with different functions. The whole system functions as an entity; an upset in one gland may well destroy the entire balance of the hormones, and unpleasant consequences and perhaps even death may result.

Gland trouble may make a person into a circus freak. The fat man, the bearded lady, the dwarf, the giant, these make their living out of endocrine disorders.

The glands are so closely interconnected that it is difficult to consider the action of one without involving some, or all, of the others. Any increase, or decrease, in the production of sex hormones may well affect the entire system. Sex hormones are not only manufactured by the sex glands, they can also be produced by the adrenals. There are two adrenal glands and they lie above the kidneys.

The continuous functioning of the adrenals is essential to life, but the most important gland of all, the master gland, is the pituitary.

This gland is formed partly from nervous tissue, and is in close proximity to the base of the brain, with which it is closely associated. Many medical books on the endocrine system refer to the pituitary as "the conductor of the endocrine orchestra". Amongst the many hormones which it secretes is one which controls the output of sex hormones by the sex glands. There is therefore a very close connection between the brain and the ovaries or testes, via the pituitary. The centre and core of each of the adrenals is also formed from nervous tissue.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychiatry, lived before the discovery and isolation of the sex hormones. He once wrote, "What constitutes masculinity or femininity is an unknown element which is beyond the power of anatomy to grasp." Now, however, it has been grasped.

When masculine and feminine sex hormones were ultimately isolated the astonishing discovery was made that they are chemically very similar indeed, with only a slight difference between their molecules. The male hormone is called *testosterone*. There are two kinds of female sex hormones, *œstrogen* and *progesterone*. Testosterone antagonises *œstrogen*, but has some *progesterone*-like properties.

Testosterone stimulates the growth and development of the genital organs; it stimulates growth of body hair and can halt baldness. All the typical masculine characteristics are due to the male hormone: general masculine appearance, deep voice, strong muscles, energetic gait, dominating and unemotional temperament, beard growth, and so on.

The female hormone is responsible for the general female appearance, rounder and more delicate. It causes the hair to grow thicker and longer on the head, but not on the face or trunk, fine skin, light muscles, high voice, less dominating personality, tendency to fatness, with a distinctive distribution. Other characteristics include breast development, accentuated emotional reactions, and maternal instinct.

-The endocrine glands of a man produce not only the male hormone, but also a certain amount of the female hormone, *œstrogen*, as well. Conversely, a woman produces some male hormone.

Oddly enough there seems to be little or no connection between physical and psychological masculinity or femininity. An outwardly very masculine man may be psychologically very feminine. And an apparently girlish male may have a tough man's nature which completely belies his exterior. There are also women who appear very feminine and fragile but who

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

behave like men, and aggressive men at that, and there are women whom one would expect, from their appearance, to have rather mannish natures, but who turn out to have charmingly feminine natures.

Another surprising thing is that there seems to be no direct connection between hormones and homosexuality. Hormones can make a tremendous difference in increasing or decreasing the sex-drive, but they do not seem to affect its direction.

There is, I believe, an indirect connection between the hormone balance and homosexuality, which I noticed when I was very much feminised but was still living as a male. I found that girls were not interested in me, but many men were. The more feminine I got, the more interested they became. It was easy to see how a boy of a very feminine type would discover that girls would not go out with him, but that men were only too eager, and thus he would drift into acquired homosexuality, and become conditioned to it.

Once conditioning had taken place, giving hormones to such a person might only increase the homosexual drive, but if hormone treatment were given early enough, then more masculine characteristics would develop and he might well develop into a perfectly normal man.

The fact that physical manhood is chemical was shown particularly clearly in one of the first cases in which testosterone was used upon a human being, back in 1937. A little boy, three years old, had a tumour in his larynx and could hardly breathe. He was given testosterone because experience had shown that these particular laryngeal tumours clear up of their own accord when a child reaches puberty. He was given injections of male hormones and the effect was quite remarkable. Within a few months he developed many of the characteristics of a fully grown man. His muscles showed the most remarkable development and he became very strong. His sex organ developed until it was almost as large as that of a grown man. Previously gentle and quiet, he now became a real little bully,

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

and had to be forcibly restrained from fighting the other children in the hospital ward.

When the injections were stopped, his whole character changed again, and the signs of his premature manhood vanished. He became kind and considerate towards the other children, and the terror of the ward was a terror no more.

Internal secretions influence everything we do, and their potency is almost beyond the powers of comprehension of the average person who is not familiar with the workings of the endocrine system. Hormones are biologically a very primitive method, found in the lowest forms of animals which are completely devoid of a nervous system. Hormones are completely interchangeable from one species to another.

*Life* once published an article concerning aggressiveness in the chicken-run. The most aggressive of the hens pecked all the others, without retaliation. The second hen in the peck order pecked all bar the first, and so on down the scale until the last poor fowl, who was completely devoid of any initiative of any sort and was pecked by all the others, who had not the slightest fear of being pecked back. Then the unfortunate one was given some doses of testosterone. She became assertive and dominating and from then on no one pecked her, but she pecked everyone!

When women become older their hormone balance often alters, they have less female hormone and more male. They often become aggressive and dominating, and are very much in evidence during bargain sales. Men, on the other hand, often lose their aggressive traits as they grow older, as the male hormone output diminishes and they lose their drive. They become fussy and are easily upset. Cases have even been known where they were hen-pecked!

It would be dangerous to assume that what we are depends entirely upon our glands, however. Dr. Starke R. Hathaway, in his *Physiological Psychology*, says, "After going through the

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

experimental and clinical literature, the thoughtful reader will conclude that the effects of personality upon glands are more impressive and easier to illustrate than are the effects of glands upon personality."

So closely connected are the mind and the body that they can almost be considered as being one and the same thing. The glandular system is the connecting link between them.

The susceptibility to impulses of endocrine origin depends to a considerable extent upon the strength of the personality, which in turn is conditioned by education, environment, and heredity. When an autopsy was performed upon the body of Napoleon it was found that there were unmistakable signs of gland changes having taken place, which in turn had affected the body. These changes were thought to have resulted from his defeats, it was suggested that they were the effects, and not the cause.

Often the endocrinologist can cure a severe case of gland trouble by changing the external factors which caused the disease, which will then cure itself. An interesting case was that of a girl who had been unlucky in love, and was admitted to hospital weighing less than four stone. Her ovaries seemed to be almost completely inactive. She was treated by change of environment and psychotherapy and was discharged as cured. Later she had to undergo more treatment to reduce her weight as she weighed over twelve stone!

The converse of this is shown by the case of a young American motor mechanic. He was an affectionate and obedient child, but during adolescence his character changed. He became moody and irritable and became a criminal, stealing and wrecking motor-cars on impulse. It was found that his testes were over-active; this was treated and afterwards his behaviour has been exemplary, and he has had no further trouble with the police.

Scientific evidence has shown that certain hormones can stimulate or inhibit the mechanism which evokes specific

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

instinctive drives in the subject. The appearance of my own maternal instinct is an example of this.

In nature one of the most wonderful examples of instinctive behaviour is the phenomenon of migration of birds. The gonads of birds enlarge in the summer and get smaller in the winter, the birds migrating northwards as the organs enlarge, and southwards as they diminish. Experiments have shown that the time and direction of migration can be influenced by hormone injection. Migration is therefore almost certainly another example of a pre-formed nervous mechanism, presumably activated by hormonal agents.

As my case is, in scientific parlance, a 'Series of one', it is difficult to draw conclusive evidence from the results obtained from the treatment. However, to my mind, one of the most fascinating aspects of the very far-reaching effects of the hormone treatment has been the changes in my instinctive behaviour.

In either sex the libido, or sexual desire, is thought to depend upon the male hormone. Frequently women cancer patients who are treated with male hormone have such an increase in libido that it annoys them. Women in their menopausal years, and also past them, often have increased libido because at this time they secrete more male hormone.

Tests have shown that brunettes excrete more male hormone than blondes. In theory, therefore, they should have more aggressiveness and sensuality, but less femininity. Women derive their natural supply of male hormone from the ovaries and also the adrenals. An adrenal tumour can cause so much testosterone to be put out that the woman may become virilised, with a deep voice, beard growth, and other signs of masculinity.

In males feminism sometimes occurs. It can be caused by an under-secretion of the male hormone, due to a deficiency of the testes, and thus the oestrin in the male acts without the neutralising effect of the testosterone.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

In order to give some idea of the complications of hormone therapy, it may be mentioned that the treatment for such a condition may involve the use of testosterone, chorionic gonadotropin, total anterior pituitary, adrenal cortex, thyroid, vitamins B and E, also calcium, iron, and phosphorus!

The skill needed is very great, hormone balance is a delicate matter and has to be most carefully supervised. Under certain conditions hormones can have a completely reversed effect. Testosterone can *feminise*, under certain circumstances.

Medical science has now progressed to the point where it is possible virtually to turn a female into a male. Although this sort of thing is still in the experimental stage quite a number of cases have been satisfactorily dealt with.

The change is incomplete, it is true, and unproductive save in one respect, namely the achievement of a tolerably happy life for the individual concerned. He can never become a father, but he can become a good and useful member of society.

The case of a male who wishes to become a female is an entirely different matter and cannot be treated in the same sort of way. Nature often changes women into men, or at least gives them a masculine psyche and sometimes virilises them so that they can live and be happy and socially acceptable as men.

Men sometimes become slightly feminised, but they do not become women. Medical science believes that on the very rare occasions that an apparent man turns into a woman it is because he has been a highly virilised woman all the time. A man has a more or less steady flow of male hormones in his body. A woman has a hormone secretion which is far more complicated and is cyclic. For fourteen days oestrogen is secreted by the ovaries, and then the progesterone takes over, without, however, the cessation of oestrogen output. At the end of the twenty-eight-day cycle the activity of both hormones ceases abruptly. The cycle is controlled by the pituitary, which

## ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

, also releases another hormone, the lactogenic, towards the end of the cycle.

When a woman is given testosterone the menstrual cycle stops. A pellet of the hormone can be implanted under her skin, and a minute quantity of chemical will be given off into the blood stream every day so that the effect will be the same as if she had testes.

This treatment often produces acne, though, typically enough of hormone treatment, testosterone has also been known to *heal* a severe case of acne!

There are vast complications in the way of converting a physically normal male to a female. One of them is the fact that it would be illegal, in this country at least.

In Denmark the Department of Justice will not now allow any more foreigners to be treated, although under certain circumstances permission may be granted to a Danish subject to undergo the treatment.

Apart from legal, ethical and social considerations, it is a fact that many of the male sex-characteristics are not reversible. A man has wide shoulders and narrow hips, larger hands and feet. He has a firm jaw and a strong face. Hormone treatment is not likely to cause voice changes, and will not necessarily cause either loss of beard or of body hair.

Unless the patient is so feminine that he can pass for a woman *before treatment commences*, it is not likely that he can be helped. Presence of deep constitutional feminism is essential.

In addition to the technical considerations there is also the fact that the transvestite has a sexual basis to his desire to change sex. If he were to find that he had become an unsexed woman he would most probably bitterly regret the change. Fortunately, it is possible to give a synthetic female hormone, stilboestrol, by mouth. This can have the effect of temporarily neutralising the output of the body's natural male hormone supply, when taken in proper quantities under medical super-

#### **ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY**

vision. The effect usually is that the transvestite loses all interest in sex and no longer bothers to dress up.

Actually only a very small proportion indeed of transvestites would change sex even if the opportunity were open to them; in nearly every case they cling to their masculinity, and the less there is to cling to the more they seem to cling to it.

Probably when more is known about the exact cause of their unfortunate plight it will be possible to help them, and they certainly owe a debt of gratitude to such pioneers as Dr. Hamburger.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS SPRING. Lisa opened the double doors which lead into the garden and the whole house seemed to take a deep breath of fresh, clean air. I turned on the radio. A dance band was playing 'April in Paris, chestnuts in blossom'. Lisa and I looked at each other for a moment, then she went out of the room. When she came down she had our passports in her hand and I was on the telephone to the airline, booking seats on an afternoon flight to Paris the following day.

A hectic twenty-four hours passed, then we found ourselves sitting in an aircraft, whilst the airport slanted away from beneath us. Everything had happened so quickly that it was hard to believe that here we were, off to Paris and adventure. It would be the first time I had been to Paris as a woman.

Orly airport, then off to the Gare des Invalides in the long bus which rattles and toots and reminds you very forcibly of the fact that you are now not in England but in France, where the traffic proceeds in a series of phenomenal avoidances—where everyone believes that the faster you go the less likely you are to have an accident, always provided of course that you sound your horn continuously.

Then a taxi, with a typically lunatic driver with a little dog on his lap. We had to go to the hotel via the Champs Elysées; the sight of a courting couple in an open horse-drawn carriage reminded us very vividly that this indeed was Paris, and spring-time at that.

The taxi stopped at some traffic lights. A few yards away on the pavement were five young men, all very Continental-

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

looking. They smiled and waved and Lisa waved and smiled back, full of the joys of spring. Then the usual furious cacophony of hooting broke out from the vehicles behind us, and a few moments later the lights went green and we were off again.

As our taxi arrived at the hotel, an enormous American car drew up, and out of it emerged the five young men. They must have had their car parked just round the corner when they first saw us, and had jumped in and followed. We had a terrible job getting rid of them. The hotel authorities seemed quite impressed, and suggested that the gentlemen took rooms too. . . .

At least it cured Lisa completely of waving and smiling at people!

Later that evening I left her in the Hôtel Claridge, where she was meeting an old friend, and wandered out into the Champs Elysées. I was just wondering whether to go up towards the Etoile or down towards the Place de la Concorde, when I realised that just across the road was the end of the Avenue George V, and my thoughts went back to that scene in the early morning during the war, with my friend running like mad to join the jeep, hotly pursued by an irate Frenchman.

I visualised the figure who had been at the wheel of the jeep, wearing an Irvin jacket over his service dress, face tanned dark brown with sun and exposure. It seemed absolutely utterly fantastic that I could possibly have anything at all in common with him. . . .

A voice at my elbow spoke, "I beg your pardon, but did I not see you just now in the hotel talking with Mlle. Lisa." The speaker was a man of about thirty-five, with a most attractive voice. I was instantly reminded of George Sanders. He went on to ask me how she was; he could not speak to her in the hotel because he had been with some people.

Then he asked me if by any chance I was free, whether I would care to have dinner with him? I thought fast. It had

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

been an excellent and most impressive approach, and it seemed that he really did know Lisa. A strange man and in Paris, though! He was apparently very much of a gentleman, but I would be absolutely asking for trouble if I went to dinner with him. What *would* my mother say if she knew? Think of the risk I would be taking! Quite definitely one of those things that just are not done. . . .

I went.

That night remains in my memory as the most pleasant and happiest time I have ever spent. He had a large English car and we went off in it. My feelings as it drove away can only be compared with those of someone who is sitting in a barrel, teetering on the brink of Niagara Falls. That night was like seeing Paris for the first time.

We went to a tiny, out-of-the-way bar, where a magnificent negro sang and played the guitar. When he had finished everyone applauded by snapping their fingers, because there was someone asleep upstairs. We went to an hotel which had been a main organising centre for the Resistance movement during the war, where now they had a real old-time cabaret.

We had dinner at a little restaurant, where he borrowed the waiter's spectacles to read the menu, and we had a very special wine. The year it was made there was a coal shortage in that particular village, and wood had to be used. The result was that that year's wine had a distinctive taste.

My memories of the evening are of a kaleidoscopic view of the most fascinating places and things. My companion could not have been more attentive. In one *boîte* where the band had played my favourite tune we had to return ten minutes after we left to get my gloves—the moment I reappeared the band struck up my tune again. . . .

It was this evening that, for the first time, I really learned what a wonderful thing it is to be a woman, and to be admired. The very depths of my soul responded to the effect of the atmosphere and the attention. It was absolute heaven.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Wodehouse once wrote: "It's like eating strawberries and cream in a new dress by moonlight on a summer night, while somebody plays the violin far away in the distance." That was exactly how I felt.

The night passed in a perfect dream. When we emerged from the last *boîte* it was daylight, and he drove me back to the hotel.

Later that morning he telephoned me. I asked him if he would like to speak to Lisa. He said that he had never met her! He had overheard me use her name. . . .

Back in England again, the discovery of new emotional depths within myself had the effect of making me think back and consider how the pattern of my feelings and general attitude to such things had altered.

I had known many girls in the past, and I had a lot of fun getting to know them. My interest, however, lay in the search for the rainbow, and not for the pot at the end of it, even if it did contain gold. Once I had met the admired girl, and got to know her a little, I was off again on the chase. Sometimes I would meet a girl and make a real friend of her; once or twice I suspected, probably quite wrongly, that she was 'falling'. When this happened I would drop her like a hot brick, and leave her severely alone from then on.

When my female libido developed it was a perfectly normal one, and I had not the slightest desire to kiss a girl, other than to give her the usual friendly peck. Lisa and I carried on the usual social life, very happy and perfectly at ease in each other's company.

She helped a great deal in my transition period from just being a female to becoming a proper woman. There is no doubt at all that a person's experience is basically coloured and limited by the sex into which he or she is born; until I had 'found' myself socially I had to be as receptive as possible.

Amongst men, I had found that when one wanted to gain attention a penetrating voice seemed to have the desired effect.

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

Amongst women, however, when the time came and I wanted to make my contribution to the conversation, or argument, instead of bawling at them I spoke quietly. This made them all stop to listen.

The main difference I noticed between the conversation of a group of young men, and a group of young women, was that the women laid much less emphasis on sex in their conversations. I had been rather led to imagine that the reverse might be the case, although I had found it a little hard to credit.

A surprisingly large number of women seem to have had practically no sex education at all, and obstinately cling to the oddest 'old wives' tales'.

I first discovered this at an all-woman tea-party, when one or two slightly naughty stories were being told. I told the story of a mother-to-be who had gone to the zoo and had been clawed by a bear: next day the baby was born and it had bare feet. There was a hush when I finished speaking; obviously it was considered rather a serious subject for such a gathering. One woman said she had heard of such things, including a case of a woman who broke her leg and had a baby born with one leg shorter than the other!

In *The Natural History of Nonsense*, Bergen Evans mentions a case in the *Boston Traveller* of an unfortunate girl who gave birth to a baby octopus. "Imagine," he says, "the horror of having to knit baby things with eight sleeves . . ."

I shall be most careful not to say anything about this report at a ladies' tea-party, otherwise I am sure there will be some worried mothers as a result!

It does seem a very great pity that more cannot be done to further adult sex education. In the magazine *Woman*, dated October 17th, 1953, was a letter from a reader who describes how badly she wanted a girl baby, and decided that the left side of the mother's body governed the birth of a female child. For nine months of pregnancy she slept only on the left side of

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

the bed, sat on her husband's left at meals and at the cinema, and in a hundred and one other ways emphasised everything left.

I was very glad to see that the baby when it came was a girl (a left-handed one!), but a great deal of trouble could have been spared by some knowledge of the elementary biological principles involved. Sex is, of course, determined at the moment of conception and by the husband.

My own maternal instinct is very strong. I never really realised it was there at all until I was on a bus, sitting in the hindmost transverse seat, when I suddenly felt a very sharp tug at my back hair. I turned round and there was a tiny little boy, three years old. His mother had dumped him on the bench seat just behind me and had gone back to fetch another child.

My heart went straight out to him and we soon got acquainted. In that moment my whole attitude to children had changed completely. He had not only pulled at my hair, he had pulled at my heart strings.

When my nature became softer and less aggressive I made the discovery that I could actually shed tears! Apart from the usual crying spells during early childhood, the last time I could remember actually shedding tears was during a boxing tournament at preparatory school, and then this was at least partly induced by a series of punches on the nose.

Now, however, I found myself watching a particularly sad film and to my utter and complete amazement I found tears in my eyes. Late one Saturday night I lay on my back in bed and heard over the radio an especially beautiful piece of music. Tears came to my eyes, and I made no effort to stop them, but just opened the taps, as it were, and let 'em come. I suddenly discovered that they were also coming out of my *ears*. A moment later I realised that what actually was happening was that as I lay on my back the tears flowed out of the corners of my eyes and into my ears, and then out again. It suddenly

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

struck me as being so remarkably funny, tears coming out of my ears, that I started to laugh at the thought. I stopped this very hastily because quite obviously for the first time, and I hope the last, I was going to have hysterics.

My temperament generally became much more variable, and less phlegmatic. I found that some days could be predicted on which I felt especially energetic and cheerful, and others when I was best by myself. This new, slightly temperamental self was more difficult to understand and cope with than the more stolid edition which preceded it.

It was a while before I was sure of the type of basic temperament which was emerging, and this was reflected in the clothes I wore, which varied between the very unostentatious and the vivid. I was wearing a bright scarlet coat when an American said, "Hiya, little red riding-hood—I'm a wolf."

Beau Brummell, in the eighteenth century, abolished the beautifully embroidered and highly-coloured clothing which had decorated the gentlemen who preceded him, and started the fashion for black and white which has been adopted by well-dressed men ever since. He certainly did women a good turn, although I know many a man wishes he could be a little more decorative and still be fashionable.

When I went to my first formal dinner-party I realised what a nice thing it is, for the women at least, to have all the men looking like a lot of penguins—it makes such a good background, and enhanced the tremendous psychological lift which I found when I was free to choose any colour I liked for my evening dress.

At first I found that I could spend an almost unlimited amount of time in getting ready for such an occasion. It was all very well for the beauty expert to say, "Before you get into the bath just pop your hair into pin-curls," but it took me forty minutes to do this minor task! Later I learned the trick of using a few pieces of stockingette as curlers, and making large, loose curls. It took me *six hours* to get ready for my first dinner-party!

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

I had done a certain amount of dancing, but it was mainly in clubs, where the crowded floor only allowed movement in the vertical plane. At last—rather too soon for my liking—came an invitation to my first ball. Although I had looked forward to it for a very long time, when the invitation finally came I nearly refused, because I felt that I was not quite ready for it. However, life is short, and I only started mine half-way through so the less time wasted the more gained. So back went the acceptance.

On the eve of the great day I went to a Turkish bath for the first time in my life. The masseuse remarked on the firmness of my figure—I did not tell her that it had only been fully developed for a few years, so naturally it was firm.

The day of the ball, I was very careful to make sure that I was only going to wear clothes and accessories which I had worn at least once before, so that I was confident that nothing unexpected would develop, such as an uncomfortable shoe or a dress that misbehaved itself.

It has been a busy day, and I have had no time to spend thinking about anything other than the immediate job in hand. Almost before I know it I am upstairs putting the finishing touches.

I realise that tonight for the first time I shall be in a brilliantly lighted room, with a large number of people. I suddenly find that I am absolutely terrified and I wish I had waited another three months. . . .

My hand is on the door-knob. I am trembling violently. Pull yourself together, girl. Yes, all right then, have another look in that full-length mirror, if you think it will give you more confidence. In a few moments the dream of your life is coming true. No jerkiness, hands flowing from the wrist, perfect poise. Just behave as though you were quite used to all this.

Out into the corridor, along to the head of the stairs—now for it. Waves of music, the dancing has already begun. If I tremble any more my knees will give way completely—no, of

### ROBERTA COWELL'S STORY

course they won't. Do the thing you fear, and fear will vanish. Now I'm walking down the wide sweep of the staircase, and my fear is vanishing. Everyone in the hall seems to be looking at me, I wonder what they're saying? If it's nice I'm glad, if it's nasty, well, perhaps it's jealousy. . . . Anyway, what do I care?

Now I must speak to my host and hostess, and I must keep my voice low and soft. And now I'm dancing, and all the blood in my body has turned to music, and I'm ecstatically happy. The past is forgotten, the future doesn't matter. I've dreamed of this moment for so long, but in its realisation it is even better than in its anticipation.

The past is forgotten. . . .



















